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HUGH CRICHTON'S ROMANCE

VOL. II.



HUGH CRICHTON'S ROMANCE

BY

CHRISTABEL R. COLERIDGE

AUTHOR OF 'LADY BETTY'

God is a Present for a Mighty King

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

London

MACMILLAN AND CO.

1875

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PART III.—*Continued.*

CHAPTER XVII.

THE GOLDEN WEDDING.

‘Tina died.’

—MR. GILFIL’S LOVE STORY.

ARTHUR went away from the Rectory whistling gaily, and succeeded in catching Hugh before he started for Oxley. Hugh was a good but not a very keen sportsman, and the rabbits were rather a sore subject ; and he replied to Arthur’s representations that, as they had been left entirely for the delectation of himself and George, it was his own fault if they were too numerous. Arthur answered that he knew Hugh had asked two

friends next week, and had supposed he would want something for them to shoot.

‘The Molyneuxes, do you mean? They’re not sportsmen. Never take out a gun.’

‘So you said yesterday, and if you have no objection George and I will polish a few off to-day. And if you will just come out early and meet us in the plantations down by the canal, you’ll see if I’m not right.’

Hugh never liked to appear indifferent about sporting matters, so he agreed to the proposal, though not very willingly, and they appointed a place and time of meeting in the afternoon. Meanwhile, Arthur, who enjoyed most things that fell to his lot, and George, who lived for the pursuit of rats and rabbits, spent a pleasant and successful morning, and when Hugh joined them could display a sufficient number of rabbits to pre-suppose either considerable skill on their parts or the existence of plenty of food for powder. Hugh, at Arthur’s suggestion,

despatched George with three couple of rabbits to the tenant-farmer on whose land they had been shooting, and sent the keeper for some more cartridges, as their supply seemed likely to run short. Hugh and Arthur, thus left together, went on through the copses, now in the full weight and depth of their summer foliage, before the first tints of autumn varied them. It was, perhaps, the time when the woods were least attractive, since they were flowerless and almost silent. Hugh was unsuccessful, and not particularly pleased thereat.

‘You have got your hand out in Italy,’ said Arthur, ‘and you have never given yourself a day’s shooting since you came home.’

‘I *am* unlucky,’ said Hugh, ‘but you know I am never a very good shot.’

‘I wanted Jem to come ; but he began to discuss the whole question of cruelty, etc., from beginning to end. So I made myself scarce.’

‘It does seem a barbarous way for civilised gentlemen to spend their time,’ said Hugh, but the appearance of a rabbit cut his remark short as he fired and missed it, with an exclamation of annoyance rather strong for a civilised gentleman with a contempt for sport.

‘So that rabbit thinks,’ said Arthur, laughing.

‘Ah, there’s Mysie talking to the Woods,’ he added, as they came across a stile into the copse by the canal and saw, through an opening, the lock and Mysie and Alice standing by it.

‘Hugh, I wish you would make them put a rail on to those gates.’

‘It’s not my affair,’ said Hugh, ‘and they’re safe enough. You had better go and help her across.’

As Hugh spoke, rather irritated by Arthur’s fancifulness, as he considered it, another little brown rabbit started out of the ferns.

‘I’ll have that one!’ he said.

‘Don’t fire,’ said Arthur. ‘Look, you’ll startle Mysie.’

‘Nonsense, it’s too far off,’ answered Hugh sharply, and fired.

They saw the white figure start and reel, then vanish from their eyes. With a loud shout of horror Arthur flung aside his gun, and leapt down through the bushes on to the path, pursued, almost outstripped, by Hugh, who sprang right into the water, as Alice’s screams brought her father and the doctor both at once to the spot.

Arthur stopped short on the brink, as nothing but the blank water met his eyes.

‘She fell in here!’ he cried, clutching Alice’s arm.

‘Oh yes, sir; yes—off the gates! Oh, where is she?’

‘She must have caught her dress in the gate!’ cried Wood.

‘Or struck her head?’ said Mr. Dickenson.

‘Let off the water—is there no boat-hook—nothing?’

What gave to Arthur the power of acting and judging he knew neither then nor afterwards. He turned round and said, low and clear :

‘No, that will take too long. Open the gates, and she will be washed down the stream. Come out, Hugh, that is useless.’

‘Yes, sir, for the Lord’s sake come out, or you’ll be drowned too,’ cried the lock-keeper, as he turned to the great handles of the gates.

‘Run, Alice, open the other!’

Quick as thought, Alice crossed the upper gates, and seized the handle. Arthur held out his hand, and, holding by a post, helped Hugh up the steep side, then ran down the bank, and stood some yards below the lock, waiting. Slowly the great doors groaned back and, with a swirl and a rush, out poured the muddy water, for the lock was

full. Hugh would have thrown himself in again, but Wood held him back. Arthur strained his eyes as the water rushed through, saw something dim and white above him ; sprang after it ; dived, disappeared, then rose to the surface—empty-handed. The impetus of the water had carried her further than he had calculated on. Both Hugh and the lock-keeper had come to his help before the white dress rose again ; but it was his hand that caught it—he caught *her* once more in his arms, gained his feet in the shallow water, and carried her to the bank.

There he laid her down with her head on Alice's lap, and wrung the water from her soft, clinging dress. She had lost her hat ; but her tightly-folded hair was still in its place, and one was left of the carnations that he had put in front of her dress in the morning.

Mr. Dickenson knelt down and examined her carefully.

‘It was not the length of time,’ he said, after a few moments.

‘Oh, sir, sir, she’s not *dead*, not *drowned*!’ screamed Alice.

‘She is not drowned. She struck her head and the back of her neck against the side. It was all over before she touched the bottom.’

He added a few technical words to explain his meaning, and Arthur understood and knew that it was true.

‘Yes, she is dead,’ he said, and the tone was as quiet, far quieter than the doctor’s own. He stood up, put Hugh aside, and took her in his arms again.

‘Will you get into that boat, Alice?’ he said, pointing to one moored at the side.

Awe-struck and sobbing, Alice obeyed.

‘Sit down in the stern,’ he said.

And then he laid Mysie down with her head once more on Alice's lap, unmoored the boat, and, with quick, vigorous strokes, rowed down towards Redhurst; rowed past the meadows and the copses, as once before he had rowed his love in the same bright evening sunlight, under the same blue sky, and had talked of the future. Now the boat went on, the girl's long fair hair dancing and waving, but her face all white and tear-stained; Arthur bare-headed, his eyes fixed far away and his lips set; and the white motionless figure, with Alice's little handkerchief over the face, between them. Those who followed them on the bank said that it was the most awful sight their eyes had ever seen—all the more awful in that it was in a way picturesque and beautiful.

Arthur stopped at the landing. He fastened up the boat and once more lifted up his burden.

'Mr. Arthur, you'll want help,' cried Wood.

‘No,’ said Arthur, ‘she is very light. Go first, Mr. Dickenson, and tell them.’

But, as he said ‘and tell them,’ a sort of quiver came over his face, and he faltered for a moment.

‘Keep close to him,’ said the doctor, ‘I’ll go on. But where’s Mr. Crichton?’

‘He may have gone ahead, sir, to break the news first.’

This seemed very probable; but, in case it had not been so, Mr. Dickenson hastened on across the meadow, up the shrubbery, and into the garden. No messenger of evil tidings could have forestalled him in his cruel task of breaking up that happy summer peace. Mr. Crichton sat restfully on the terrace, watching for the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt. James, on the step below her, was smoking, stroking his long, brown beard, and discoursing dreamily. Frederica, in her white muslin and red ribbons, was teasing Snap. Mysie’s doves, at a safe dis-

tance from Snap, were cooing on the grass ; the great peacock strutting along in the background.

‘Mr. James Crichton!’ said Mr. Dickenson, stopping short of the terrace, with a glance that brought James to his side in a moment.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Mr. James, Miss Crofton has met with an accident. She has fallen into the water, and Mr. Arthur is bringing her home. You had better get the ladies into the house.’

But, as he spoke, up from the sunny meadows came Arthur, with Mysie in his arms, closely followed by Alice Wood, now sobbing and clinging to her father’s coat. James gave one look, and saw that Mysie’s face was covered.

‘Mamma! there’s an accident! Come in. Come in.’ But Mrs. Crichton had started up with a shriek and rushed down the path.

‘What is it; what is it? The water? Has she come to herself?’

‘You must let me take her in,’ said Arthur, in a low, quiet voice, while James held back his mother; and Wood said, choking: ‘Lord have mercy on us, ma’am; she’ll never come to herself in this world!’

Arthur took no notice; he went on, and they all followed indiscriminately, the servants rushing out with wild cries and questions. Arthur went up the steps, across the terrace, and through the open window, into the drawing room, where, on the sofa, he laid his dead love down. Then he paused, hanging over her, and drew the handkerchief a little back, and put his hand softly on her wrist.

‘Arthur! Arthur, my poor boy, come away,’ said James, in his ear.

Arthur turned round and faced them.

‘How did it happen? how did it happen?’ gasped Mrs. Crichton.

‘The noise of the gun startled her, and she fell off the lock. She struck her head against the side, and she is dead—she is dead,’ he repeated. And, in the moment’s blank pause that followed, Alice Wood’s voice rose in a wild shriek : ‘Dead! oh, Miss Mysie’s dead!’

‘Take care of that poor little girl,’ said Arthur; ‘she has—,’ but with the words his voice failed him; he staggered, and fell down in a dead faint, before James could catch him, for they had all fallen back with a sort of awe, before his collected voice and the wild stare in his eyes.

They lifted Arthur up and carried him into the house and upstairs to his own room, whither the doctor followed them. The maid-servants pressed into the drawing-room, with tears and cries of pity, till the old nurse came and put them all back. She knew what to do.

Mrs. Crichton sat down again in her

chair on the terrace, Frederica crouching with her head in her aunt's lap, while Wood, whose daughter had been carried off by the maids, repeated the sad story.

It was not very easy to understand its details, told with sobs and comments innumerable; but the fact was slowly borne in on them—Mysie was dead!

Presently James returned.

‘He is coming to himself,’ he said. ‘Dickenson is going to give him some strong opiate; then he hopes that he will sleep before he knows what has happened. No one must go to him or try to rouse him now.’

‘I cannot understand, now, how it happened,’ said Mrs. Crichton. ‘Where is Hugh?’

Where was Hugh? His brother's absence struck James for the first time as extraordinary.

‘Mother,’ he said, ‘you had better let me

take you into the house, and I will ask Dickenson if he knows where Hugh has gone to. Get up, Freddie, my dear girl, take care of mother. Yes, that's right,' as Frederica, with unexpected self-command, stood up, choked back her sobs, and took her aunt by the hand. Perhaps it had hardly come yet to the time for overwhelming grief, for Mrs. Crichton rose and walked into the house, unable to realise the truth of what still seemed like a frightful dream.

'What became of my brother?' he said to Wood.

'Indeed, sir, I can't remember. I saw nothing but Mr. Arthur with the dear young lady in his arms; but Mr. Crichton all the time was like one demented, and would have been drowned too if Mr. Arthur had not dragged him out, and I held him back from jumping into the water before the gates were fairly open. O Lord! sir,

there's the Rector coming. This news will kill the poor old gentleman, surely.'

But the ill news had flown faster than they thought for, and the office of comforter had been familiar for too many years to Mr. Harcourt for him to shrink from it now; and, instead of the merry dinner-party to which he and his wife had been summoned, he had left her to realise that she had bidden little Mysie farewell for ever only a few hours before.

'Her golden wedding—her golden wedding!' he said; but with what force of allusion James hardly knew. He took the Rector, however, to his mother; and when he came out again, with a vague idea of watching for Hugh, Wood had gone to look after his daughter; and Mr. Dickenson came out, reporting that Arthur, under the influence of the opiate, had fallen asleep, without rousing to the consciousness of what had happened.

‘So best,’ said James, with a heavy sigh; ‘but, Mr. Dickenson, what can have become of Hugh?’

‘Your brother? I never thought of him till this moment!’

‘Nor I, till my mother asked for him. There—no—that’s George. What can have become of him?’

As he spoke, George, white and terrified, came panting up the path and threw himself upon James.

‘Jem! Where’s Mysie; where’s Mysie?’

Involuntarily James glanced back at the drawing-room, where now the window was shut and the blind drawn down behind it.

‘Have you heard anything, George?’ he said; ‘there has been a sad accident on the lock.’

‘I have seen Hugh,’ said George.

‘Hugh! Where?’

‘In the copse by the lock. Oh, Jem, he was sitting on the ground, and he had

Arthur's gun in his hand—not his own—and there was a dead rabbit. He looked—I couldn't ask him a word. He said: "Go home, George, there's no more shooting; Mysie is drowned, and—and——"

'Steady, my boy,' said the doctor, as George paused and gasped, 'take your time. What did he say?'

'He said—he said, "I have killed her!"'

'Nothing,' interposed Mr. Dickenson, as James almost dropped into a chair with a start of horror, '*Nothing* that anyone says on a night like this is of the slightest consequence whatever. We don't know what we say. What followed, George?'

'I said, "Oh, come now, Hugh, you had better come home. Where's Arthur?" And he stood up and cried out "Arthur! Arthur! Never—never!" and then he rushed off out on to the heath. So,' concluded George, 'I thought he was mad or something, and I ran as hard as I could to fetch someone. I

never thought it was true till I saw the lock gates open and little Bessie Wood, screaming and crying, with Mysie's wet hat ; and I ran on, and there was this pink bow she wore round her neck, wet, on the path in the meadow. Oh, Jem, she's never drowned, really—not *really*,' as Jem burst into tears at sight of the gay pink ribbon.

'George,' said the doctor, 'you must be a man, there's need of it. Go and fetch Mr. James some wine, and drink some yourself; then come back, we shall want you. Call Wood, too.'

'I think,' said George, as he went, 'someone had better look for Hugh.'

'I think so too,' said Mr. Dickenson. 'If Mr. Crichton has any morbid ideas in his head, the sooner they are dispelled the better.'

'He could not have done it,' said James, confusedly ; 'she was not *shot*.'

'Of course not, and if she was acci-

dentally startled by the sound of the gun no blame could attach to anyone. Here,' as George returned with the wine, 'take some; we have all work before us. Wood,' he added, 'do you think poor Mr. Spencer right in saying Miss Crofton was startled by the sound of a gun?'

'All I know, sir, is that my daughter she screamed out, "The gun—the gun!" and I ran out of the house, and Mr. Arthur came tearing down from the copse without his gun. Mr. Crichton he threw his away as he jumped into the water. I heard no gun in the house.'

'Neither did I,' said the doctor, 'but, you see, we shall have to have their evidence to-morrow.'

'The inquest!' said James. 'Ah, I never thought of that. What? Must poor Arthur?——'

'I am afraid he must; but, of course, if your brother is there to tell the story, he

need say very little. But Mr. Crichton *must* be there, you know, and we must get him home without delay.'

'I had better go and look for him,' said James, 'though I hardly like to leave my mother.'

'I can stay here,' said Mr. Dickenson; 'and I can arrange for to-morrow better than you. Could any lady come to Mrs. Crichton; and are there any relations to be sent for?'

'No,' said James, 'Mysie has no near relations but my mother. But Miss Venning would come to us I am sure. George, you might go and fetch her.'

'Yes; but where's Arthur?'

'He fainted; he is asleep. You can't go to him now. Say nothing about Hugh. Of course, he would come back soon, but I shall go for him. Why, it is getting dusk; is it night or morning? What time can it be?'

‘ It is eight o’clock,’ said Mr. Dickenson ;
‘ or but a little after.’

James felt as if years had passed since he had seen Arthur come up the path with his sad burden, but the excitement of looking for Hugh came in almost as a relief. James was less alarmed by his absence than anyone less well acquainted with Hugh might have been. He knew the violence with which Hugh’s feelings were apt to overpower him in the first moments of a great shock, and also how completely he was soon able to govern and conceal them. James had little doubt of his speedy return ; but it was less wretched to walk rapidly away with Wood, who wanted to return to his children—Alice having been left with the maids at Redhurst—than to sit at home and begin to realise what a blow had fallen on the home which had always seemed, in the few holiday weeks that he spent there, the realisation of sunshine and peace.

They came down towards the lock, which did not yet impress James with any sense of horror, so little realised was the scene connected with it.

‘Why, if there ain’t the whole place turned out!’ cried Wood, as they came in sight of it, and voices broke on the stillness. The banks of the canal were covered with people, gaping and staring, and surrounding the Wood children, who enjoyed the honour of having been first in the field.

‘Well, here’s all Redhurst and half Oxley, and more coming along the path. Get into the house, Bessie, you little forward, unfeeling hussy, a-chattering about the poor dear young lady you saw drowned before your eyes!’ cried Wood, not knowing why his real share in the sad tragedy made him so impatient of idle curiosity regarding it. Not but what there would be many genuine tears shed from many eyes for sweet Mysie Crofton; but excitement is a powerful rival at first to grief.

James stood aghast. How could he go and look for Hugh in all this confusion? How would Hugh face it?

Up stepped the inspector of police from Oxley.

‘Mr. James Crichton, I was fortunately on the spot first, and I have secured the gentlemen’s guns. One was found in the wood and one on the bank; also this rabbit.’

‘Is Mr. Spencer Crichton here?’ said James.

‘No, sir, I have not seen him.’

‘Can’t you get all these people away?’

‘Well, sir, accidents always collect a crowd.’

‘My brother,’ said James, ‘was here at the time. Perhaps, if you see him, you would tell him he is wanted at home.’

‘Very well, sir,’ said the inspector, with an absence of comment which was a great relief to James, who was now beset by a

crowd of Redhurst folk, with questions and lamentations.

‘It is all true,’ James said. ‘We and all the place are in sad trouble. I think our friends had better go home and leave it to strangers to stare about this place.’

This produced a little effect, and Bessie, picking up the cue, hustled off the younger ones, telling them ‘to go in and not to be a-staring. Wasn’t Miss Mysie always telling them as little girls shouldn’t run after crowds like that of evenings?’

James ran up into the copse and out on the heath behind it; but he saw no signs of Hugh, and as the light failed he went home in despair, with the picture of his brother, as George had described him, more vividly impressed on his mind than any other of the sad events of the evening. Poor James! he did not know how to contend with the difficulties that he was left alone to bear. He was frightened to death at Hugh’s disappearance,

and was almost ready to hope that Arthur might have awakened in his absence to bring his quicker powers of action to bear on the matter. For James felt that he had done just nothing.

It was some relief to find that no one could suggest any other course of action. Miss Venning had arrived and had persuaded his mother to go to bed ; and James sat up, waiting and speculating on every possible and impossible cause and result of Hugh's absence. The unalterable fact of Mysie's death left no room for fear. Arthur was, for the moment, at rest ; but what was Hugh doing ?

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MORNING LIGHT.

‘ All joys took wing,
And fled before the dawn.

· · · · ·
Oh, love, I knew that I should meet my love—
Should find my love no more.’

IN the still grey silence of early morning Arthur awoke slowly, and with a confused sense that things were not as usual. He looked round the room. It had been a hot night, and the window was wide open and the blind up, so that he could see the quiet cloudy sky and hear the twittering of the birds in the ivy. He put his hand to feel for his watch, and could not find it. Then he tried to recollect what he had done with it the

night before, and could recollect nothing. Presently the church clock chimed four. It was very early; what could bring James into his room fully dressed, and with a pale wide-awake look on his face? James came up to the bed without speaking, and put his hand on Arthur's.

‘What is the matter; have I been ill?’ said Arthur.

‘You fainted,’ said James, in a much-shaken voice.

‘Did I? I am quite well now. I can’t remember.’ Poor James blamed himself severely, both then and afterwards, for having no words with which to help or hinder Arthur’s recollection; but the great grey eyes in their black circles, fixed on him with a trouble not yet understood, completely unnerved him: he could not speak or look. Perhaps his silence answered the purpose as well as any speech. Arthur grew

frightened ; his heart began to beat, and his hands to tremble—his face flushed.

‘What is the matter, Jem?’ he said again, but with a sharper accent.

‘Try to remember all you did yesterday,’ said James, at length.

‘Yesterday? We went to the rectory with some flowers, and I left Mysie there. Mysie?’ He repeated the name with a sort of enquiry, and then James saw the trouble in his face increase as memory began to awaken and pictures, dim, yet terrible, to form themselves in his mind. He dropped back on the pillow, and lay silent, grasping Jem’s hand hard. ‘Is it a bad dream, Jem?’ he said at length.

‘No, no ; not a dream,’ faltered Jem.

‘Then I remember ; then I know, now.’

Probably his senses were still dulled and quieted by the opiate, for there was no violent outbreak of misery ; he only turned away and hid his face, and James dared not

put a single question to him, keen as was his curiosity, for Hugh had not yet come home. He thought it best to leave Arthur alone, as the doctor, when obliged some hours since to leave them, had advised that no attempt should be made to rouse him. Arthur lay quiet for a long time, slowly recalling step by step what had passed, till every incident was clear before him ; till he saw again the copse and the rabbits, the swirling water, the boat in the sunshine ; felt again the burden in his arms, yet was, perhaps, half asleep still ; for, all at once, he roused up and sat upright with a start. After all, was it true ?

It was quite broad daylight, and he heard movements in the house. He would get up. Had he had a bad dream after all ? He got up, and the first thing he saw and touched was the coat he had worn the day before, which had been thrown aside and was still wet through. The keenest pang he had yet known shot through him as he touched it ;

but still he began to dress, and came down stairs and went out into the garden. Was it really only twenty-four hours ago that Mysie had left the print of her footfall on the dew as she gathered the flowers for her Golden wedding gift? Had she really sat here on the top of the steps and filled her basket with them? Arthur looked down the path towards the meadows, then turned towards it. 'If I see that,' he thought, 'I shall understand. Surely it cannot be!' But he did not set his foot on it, but shrank away with a shiver; for he knew that the sight of the meadows would have brought the truth home, and he knew what was the truth. He went back to the house, and, in a sort of instinctive fashion, turned his steps to the dining-room, where Miss Venning was making breakfast; James and the two younger ones were standing about in a vague, uncertain fashion. They all started at sight of Arthur. George slunk out of the room

in a shame-faced, school-boy fashion ; while Frederica burst into tears and looked much inclined to follow his example. They were afraid of their brother, afraid of his awful, uncomprehended sorrow. Even Miss Venning could not speak to him as she took his hand, and James said, half-shyly : ‘ Will you have some breakfast, Arthur ? ’

‘ Not here,’ he said, ‘ not here,’ as their manner began to bring the great change home.

James brought some to him in the study, and began affectionately to coax him to eat something.

‘ You must,’ he said. ‘ You know there is something before you to-day. I wish we could spare you from it ; but they must have you at—at——’

‘ I know,’ said Arthur. ‘ Thanks, Jem ; but it won’t make much difference. When is it ? ’

‘ About eleven. Arthur, I must ask you, do you know anything about Hugh ? ’

‘About Hugh? No; where is he?’

‘He has never come back.’

‘Never come back?’ said Arthur, in a much more wide-awake and natural manner.

‘Why, where can he be?’

‘George saw him in the copse; he seemed—he seemed to blame himself.’

‘What? Because I told him not to fire?’

‘You told him not to fire?’ ejaculated James.

Arthur leant back and shaded his eyes with his hand.

‘I don’t think I’ll talk about it now,’ he said gently. ‘I must tell them by-and-by. But it is nothing—nothing that you fancy.’

‘But Hugh should be there?’

‘Of course he should. I can’t remember anything about him,’ he added, after a moment, ‘except that I pulled him out of the water.’

‘Don’t talk now, my dear boy,’ said Jem,

as Arthur's voice failed. 'It will soon be over, and Hugh will surely come.'

'Jem!'

'Yes?'

'I know it is true now. Don't let me forget and get confused again. I feel so stupid.' Then, after a moment: 'Let me go and see her.'

'Oh, not now, Arty; not till this wretched business is over. Stay here and rest till then. I'll call you in time.'

Arthur yielded; he even drank some tea and ate a little at James's entreaty; and the latter was wondering whether to leave him alone, when he caught sight of Hugh coming up the path. Arthur saw him too, and the presence of another actor in the terrible scene effectually roused him.

'Go to him,' he said. 'Go to him; leave me alone; no one can do anything for me. I shall be ready when you want me—don't be afraid.'

James's anxiety could endure no longer, and he hurried out to meet his brother, upon whom no merciful boon of unconsciousness had descended ; who had had no period of uncertainty in which to grow accustomed to the shadow of the truth.

He had turned his head as he fired, and had seen her fall ; and in a moment his ill-tempered disregard of Arthur's warning flashed back on him, never again to be forgotten. To risk his own life in saving hers was his one thought, and his self-possession and power of judgment had failed him entirely, so that his efforts, even had there been a chance for her, would have been utterly useless. He stood by and heard the doctor's verdict, and Arthur's steady 'Yes, she is dead ;' felt Arthur push him away, and took the unconscious action as a proof of the horror with which Arthur must henceforth regard him, of the horror with which he must regard himself. He stood still, and

saw the boat start on its sad and awful way, saw them all follow, forgetful of everything but the freight that it contained.

‘Poor, sweet young lady!’ groaned Wood, as he followed.

‘Poor boy—poor boy; it’s a life ruined,’ sighed the doctor. But Hugh stood still, and thought—

‘*I* have done it. Was ever such a fate as mine?’

He slunk away back into the wood, and stood looking at the lock, there from the spot where that last shot had been fired. He repeated over to himself those words exchanged between himself and Arthur; he saw the rabbit lying dead on the ground. ‘It’s the first I’ve hit to-day,’ he thought. A moment’s hastiness, a moment’s want of thought, and *this* is the result! Oh, it is cruel! Then such an anguish of horror at the desolation that he had caused came over him that it was with a start of something like

satisfaction that he caught sight of Arthur's gun where it had been thrown aside on the grass. He took it up, but it had been discharged; and he remembered that Arthur had not reloaded it after his last shot. 'There is always the canal,' thought Hugh. 'My life was blank enough and hard enough before; but now——' It was at this point in his meditations that George had encountered him, and that the boy's inquiry for Arthur had so maddened him that he had rushed off, unheeding where he went; maddened not only—not so much at the thought that Mysie had died a frightful death and that Arthur's life was ruined, as that he himself had been the cause of it all. Filled with a wild, exaggerated sense of blood-guiltiness, he counted up every aggravating circumstance, his old jealousy of his cousins' happiness—his impatience of their laughter and their love, the fact that he was Mysie's guardian, and so responsible for her

lot, and that he had been hardly willing to trust her happiness to Arthur's care. He made out the case against himself as no one else would have made it out against him; and then, with a not uncommon inconsistency, ascribed to a cruel chance the wretched result, and felt that he was the sport of circumstances. The deeps of faithless, bitter rebellion rose up to overwhelm him, and he did not cry out of them for help. But the image of Violante came before him, fair and sweet, yet full of reproach for his harsh judgment and hasty desertion. He pushed the thought away from him—was not he one who could never indulge in such thoughts again? Yet he stopped in his wild wrath, and threw himself down on the heath, and, in the midst of a remorse and despair that threatened to drive him mad, he wept for his lost love. They were terrible hours, so terrible as to blot out to Hugh the thought of all the other sufferers; so absorbing that

he never paused to wonder what was passing at Redhurst ; and they were succeeded by a sort of passive exhaustion, in which the acute pain was dulled, and from which he roused himself with a start and sat upright. It was quite dark, clouds had come up over the sunny sky, and neither moon nor stars lighted up the wild waste of moorland. The night was still and absolutely silent. Hugh did not know where he was as his outer life came back upon him with a strange incongruous sense of the necessity of Mr. Spencer Crichton's presence on the scene of action ; and, chilled and over-excited as he was, a consciousness of physical discomfort that made him get to his feet and look about him. No, he could not kill himself, nor even lie there to die ; all Oxley would be wondering what had become of him—an odd consideration at such a moment ; but it brought the further thought of all the painful business to be got through ; and who but

himself to do it? Somehow, the habit of being forced to consider such necessities did more to bring Hugh to his senses than anything else, and he made up his mind to go home. What right had he to shirk the sight of Arthur's misery? It was part of his punishment. He was, however, so much exhausted as to be hardly able to support himself, and, moreover, where was he? He looked about, and saw far off a red light, which he knew must shine from Fordham Station. He must make for that. With fatigue and weariness such as he had never known before he stumbled over the heather, and came at last into Fordham village as the church clock struck half-past eleven. He knew that he could not get home without rest, and went into the inn, making some slight excuse of having lost his way—an excuse which he knew would be scattered to the winds to-morrow. However, the hostess knew him, and gave him supper—which he

scarcely touched—and a fire; and he lay down for a little, meaning to start as soon as it was light. All sorts of other schemes passed through his mind; of disappearance, of never going home any more or inflicting the sight of himself on his friends; but, somehow, custom and common-sense turned his steps the next morning in the direction of Redhurst, dragging more and more as he drew near, dreading to come up to the house or to show himself; till James rushed out, to his utter surprise, with a cry of relief.

‘Thank Heaven, you’re here at last! Where have you been? We were so anxious!’

‘I came back because I supposed there would be things to attend to,’ said Hugh, in an odd unnatural voice.

‘Yes, of course. We must try to get poor Arthur through it.’

‘Don’t let him see me.’

‘Hugh, I can’t understand this. He *must* see you—he doesn’t take it so,’ said James,

much frightened at his brother's wild, haggard look.

Hugh stood looking down at the gravel. Presently he said : ' I'll go and change my things. Let me have some breakfast. Where is it, and when ? '

' At the Red Lion, at eleven.'

' I will attend to it.'

They were such commonplace words, and in one way Hugh seemed so entirely himself, that James was all the more confused and puzzled. Hugh went upstairs, made his toilet, and, after eating a few mouthfuls, went off to the village, without asking for his mother, who—fortunately, had not been aware of his absence—and, indeed, without speaking to anyone. Arthur came out at James's summons. The dreamy look was gone, and he was evidently concentrating all his strength on the effort to bear up through the coming trial. He did not try to speak till they reached the inn, where, as they sat down in

the quietest corner, he whispered : ‘ Don’t be afraid. I shall manage.’

Hugh was being talked to, before the proceedings began, by the coroner and one or two others; but made, it seemed to James, hardly any answer to them.

The scene was first described by Mr. Dickenson and by Wood, who could only take up the story after Mysie’s fall, of which Alice had been the only witness on the spot.

The poor little girl, sobbing and trembling, had answered that she had seen Miss Crofton fall, and then——

‘ Can you give any reason for it ? ’

‘ It was the gun, sir.’

‘ What gun ? ’

‘ If you please, sir, I don’t know.’

Then Hugh stood up.

‘ I do. It was mine. Will you have the goodness to take my evidence next, and I think you will see that there is no occasion to trouble anyone else.’

The coroner assented, and Hugh, having been sworn, went on in a hard, cold voice :

‘ My cousin and I were shooting in the copse. I was put out of temper because I missed aim twice. My cousin saw her—Miss Crofton—standing by the lock ; so did I. He said the gates were dangerous, and I contradicted him, and was irritated by what I thought foolish anxiety. A rabbit got up and I raised my gun. My cousin said : ‘ Don’t fire, you’ll startle——her ’—Hugh could not get out the name. ‘ I said, “ Nonsense, it is too far off ; ” and I fired, and she *was* startled, and she fell off and was drowned. Those are the facts ; it is my doing entirely.’

There was a pause of shocked attention, which was broken by Arthur, who came forward and stood by Hugh.

‘ I wish to say something.’

‘ Certainly, Mr. Spencer. It is my duty

to ask you if Mr. Spencer Crichton has stated the facts correctly.'

'Yes,' said Arthur. 'Those are the facts; but my cousin has given you a wrong impression. He did not, I am sure, see where she was when he fired, and—and—we *were* at some distance. He could not know, as I do, how easily she is startled.'

'I did know it, Arthur,' said Hugh passionately. 'I did know where she was!'

'It might have happened to me,' said Arthur, earnestly. 'Indeed, there is no blame.'

'You thought so then,' cried Hugh, losing all sense of the listeners. 'You pushed me back; you would not let me touch her! What wonder if you cursed the day I was born!'

'Hush, hush!' interposed Arthur. 'That can do no good.'

'Yes, Mr. Crichton,' said the coroner, 'it would be better to control yourself. Mr.

Spencer's language is generous in the extreme. Of course, no one could doubt for a moment that this unhappy event was entirely accidental; but it is never safe to disregard a warning as to fire-arms, however apparently superfluous. Of course, we can feel and express nothing but the profoundest sympathy for yourself and for all those for whom the neighbourhood entertains such high respect.'

There was no hesitation as to the verdict; and when it was over, and those engaged began to disperse, Arthur went up to Hugh and laid his hand on his arm and said:

'Come, Hugh, let us get home—that will be best for us.'

Hugh shook off the hand and shrank from him with a sort of horror.

'Don't touch me—don't speak to me!' he cried.

Arthur looked surprised and disappointed; and James, who had been hitherto utterly

silenced by the horror of Hugh's avowal; hastily drew him away, seeing that he could hardly bear up any longer. Hugh followed them up the garden and into the study, and then broke out into a torrent of self-reproach, so violent and so uncontrollable that Arthur vainly tried to silence it.

‘I have broken your heart,’ he cried. ‘There is no atonement I can make—none. My life can’t make it up to you. The sight of your grief will kill me! I have destroyed her, the beautiful, innocent creature. I was jealous of your happiness and of hers, and I have ruined it for ever!’

‘Don’t, Hugh, don’t,’ said Arthur, faintly; ‘don’t, I can’t bear it!’

‘Bear it! Vent it all on me—tell me how you hate me.’

‘Be quiet, Hugh,’ interposed James, sternly, as he saw that Arthur grew whiter and whiter. ‘The least you can do is not to distress him now. This is too much;’ as

poor Arthur, after vainly attempting to speak, burst into tears. 'Oh, mother,' as Mrs. Crichton came hurriedly into the room, 'Arthur must be quiet now.'

But Arthur turned as she went towards him, hardly seeing her son—of whose special interest in the matter she was quite unconscious—and threw his arms round her, and laid his head on her shoulder, letting his grief have free course at last, while she tenderly soothed him and drew him down by her on the sofa.

'Never mind, Jem,' she said; 'leave him to me; this is the best thing that can happen. My poor boy!'

Hugh looked at them for a moment, then turned and went away by himself.

CHAPTER XIX.

DARK DAYS.

'Then he sat down, sad and speechless,
 At the feet of Minnehaha—
 At the feet of Laughing Water—
 At those willing feet that never
 More would lightly run to meet him,
 Never more would lightly follow.

 Then they buried Minnehaha.'

THERE was very little to be done at Red-
 hurst during the few sad days that followed.
 Mysie's fortune was inherited by a second
 cousin on her father's side—a middle-aged
 clergyman, who had never seen her, and who
 was the father of a large young family, and
 the letter to announce her death to him was
 almost the only one of any imperative con-

sequence as a matter of business, while it was a very simple statement of affairs which Hugh must hand over to him when he came to the funeral, which was fixed for the Saturday morning. A heavier cloud could hardly have descended on any household ; but Mrs. Spencer Crichton was a person of strong nerves ; and, deep and sincere as was her sorrow, it was not quite the desolation that it must have been had Mysie been her own child. She was able to stay with Arthur till his first agony had a little subsided, and he murmured something about ' Hugh.'

' Do you want him, my dear ?'

' No ; but he will want you.'

' Oh yes, presently. Don't you trouble yourself, Arty. You can tell us by-and-by if there is anything you wish. But I will go if you like to be alone. Shall I tell Hugh anything ?'

Arthur felt quite incapable of any explanation ; it was an effort even to think of

Hugh ; his grief was utterly crushing and overwhelming.

‘ Give him my love,’ he said.

His aunt thought it rather an odd message ; but she did not wish to tease Arthur with talking, and she knew that it was quite useless to attempt to comfort him, and so left him alone. She encountered James hanging about the hall, looking forlorn and frightened.

‘ Oh, mamma,’ he said, ‘ I don’t know what is to be done.’

‘ He is better now,’ said Mrs. Crichton, ‘ and I think it is best to leave him quiet.’

‘ I’m not thinking about him. It’s Hugh.’

‘ Hugh?’

‘ Don’t you know, mother, how it was?’ And James, as well as he could, repeated the substance of what had passed at the inquest.

‘ My dear,’ said Mrs. Crichton, with

energy, 'I should never allow such a thing to be repeated. Don't say a word about it, and it will die out of their minds. I shouldn't think of regarding it from that point of view. Why, it's enough to drive them both mad.'

'But it's true, mother,' said Jem, gloomily.

'True? Not at all; those things rest on the turn of a hair, and Hugh must not be allowed to dwell on it. Where is he?'

Even in the midst of his misery James could hardly help smiling at his mother's view.

'He shut himself into his room,' he said. 'Of course, he might work himself up into thinking anything his fault. It was *not* his fault. It is a matter which entirely depends on the way in which you regard it. I could not think why he was on Arthur's mind—he sent him his love.'

'Did he? Oh, he is very—generous,' said James, much affected. 'Oh, mother, mother,

to think of his life yesterday and *now*! No wonder Hugh is half mad.'

Mrs. Crichton cried irrepressibly for a few minutes. 'Jem, she was the sunshine of the place. My dear little girl! But I can't allow Hugh to take it in the way you speak of, and I beg you never to put it in such a point of view.'

Mrs. Crichton rose as she spoke, and went upstairs to her son's room. Jem followed, totally unable to understand her conduct. He forgot that his confused half-hinted story was not the same thing as the actual scene, or as Hugh's brief, bitter narration of it, and could not make the same impression. Mrs. Crichton knocked, but hardly waited for an answer. Hugh stood facing them.

'Am I wanted?' he said.

'Why yes, my dear, of course. Who else can settle things but you. Poor Arthur can think of nothing.'

‘He must not be troubled,’ said Hugh,
‘I will come at once.’

‘That is right. I was perfectly certain that you would not give way to any such foolish morbid notions as Jem suggests; they can only cause far more distress to Arthur and to us all. He sent you his love—’

‘He need not have done *that*,’ said Hugh, in a hard, cold voice, though he trembled so much that he was obliged to sit down. ‘Mother, you are mistaken; I, and only I, am to blame. All this wretchedness has been caused by my temper and presumption. Just a moment’s ill-temper,’ he added, with intense bitterness.

‘That is exactly what I say, my dear. You make matters worse by exaggerating. No one would think of such a thing but yourself. Turn your back at once on the thought. There is quite enough to break all our hearts without that.’

It is not always wise to ignore passionate

feeling, even when it is supposed to be unreasonable. Hugh felt keenly that his mother gave him no sympathy in the trial which he believed to be more bitter than that of Arthur, whom he had seen her soothe and caress. He had neither the tact to conceive nor the unselfishness to carry out the idea that, as the miserable truth *did* greatly add to the pain of all concerned, it would be better to bury it and his remorse in his own breast. Rather would he do penance for it in every way that he could.

‘There is enough to break hearts,’ he said, ‘and it is through my means they are broken. But don’t fear that I shall shrink from anything that has to be done. There is no need that Arthur should see me.’

‘Arthur must rest, and you too, Hugh,’ interposed James. ‘There is nothing very pressing. Go to bed, you were up all night—do, now, there’s a good fellow.’

‘Thank you, I want no rest,’ said Hugh.

‘If mother likes I will come and write letters and settle matters now.’

‘Yes, my dear, that will be best,’ said Mrs. Crichton, ‘and will help you to recover your balance better.’

Hugh thought his mother unfeeling ; Arthur clung to her as his kindest comforter. She thoroughly understood and acknowledged the one grief, and it was such that no one could turn their backs on it ; but Mrs. Crichton was a person whom nature had gifted with an almost over-amount of that rare quality, a tendency to make the best of things. It was her nature to ignore grief where it was possible, to smoothe it over and hide it, to seize on its most tolerable side ; and she could not understand Hugh's impulse to drink the cup to the dregs. Her mind went on, even in these first sad days, to plans for a little lightening the cloud that covered them ; and she was not a person who could sympathise with an

unhappiness of which she did not thoroughly admit the necessity, or the duration of which she thought extreme. Moreover, there was some sense in the view that least said was soonest mended, as far as Hugh was concerned, and that the unhappy words which had accompanied the fatal shot were best forgotten. Here James agreed with her. He had more power of realising the feelings of those around him ; but the black oppression was very trying to his kindly nature, and, in the intervals of being as kind and helpful as he knew how, would creep out into the shrubbery with a book or his pipe, or get a little taste of the outside world by answering enquiries or undertaking commissions. Hugh did everything that was necessary, and did not renew the discussion ; but he avoided Arthur entirely, and looked so worn out with misery as to excite the pity of everyone who saw him. He pictured to himself the dread that Arthur must have

of meeting him, till his own dread grew so intense that nothing but his sense that he deserved any and every punishment could have induced him to face the hour when they must stand side by side at Mysie's grave.

The truth was that Arthur had hardly thought about him at all, had scarcely noticed that when he occasionally came downstairs or sat on the terrace Hugh was not there. His own future life had not yet come before him ; the causes that had so changed it were all swallowed up in the great fact of the change. It was of Mysie that he thought hour after hour, of her face and her voice and her sweet eyes, and of every word and look they had exchanged during their brief and sweet betrothal. He was very gentle and grateful for the kindness shown him, and his habitual unselfishness made him considerate of all the rest ; but, though there was a sort of surface readiness

to be comforted about him, nothing really touched him much. They were all very kind, but he loved none of them with the intense and personal love which only could have gone to his heart then. He made no effort to hide or deny his sorrow, admitting it simply; but he did not talk much about Mysie, and not at all about himself. He did not seem conscious of any want of occupation, though he did little or nothing, and suffered less physically than might have been expected after such a shock. But that awful scene which seemed to have burnt itself in on Hugh's eyeballs as yet scarcely haunted Arthur—partly because he had acted in it, not seen it; but more entirely because he was so much absorbed in his sorrow that he had not begun to think of how it had come about. They said he bore it beautifully, because he uttered no outcries against fate and could smile when people were kind to him; but, in truth, his spirit was too much

crushed for rebellion; even his own loneliness and changed life had hardly yet come before him. At night, or when he had been long alone, his first sense of unreality would again recur to him and the truth come upon him in its first freshness as he met the sad faces of the others, or as he looked on the face, not sad, but still and fair, of his lost love. On that face Hugh never looked; but it was as Arthur knelt beside her that he saw Mr. Harcourt again. The old rector laid his hands on his head, and once more repeated the blessing he had given him so short a time before.

‘She will have fifty happy years, my boy,’ he said.

‘But I—but I—’ and poor Arthur hurried away, utterly overpowered, though afterwards he tried to say something to James about ‘Mr. Harcourt’s kindness, and there was one thing he wished.’

‘Anything you wish, Arthur. What is it?’

‘That Sunday,’ said Arthur—as if, poor fellow, it had been some day last year—‘they sang a hymn, and she spoke of it. If, to-morrow—’

‘I remember,’ said Jem. ‘Yes, we’ll have it. Mr. Crofton has come,’ he added.

‘Has he? I think I ought to come down and see him.’

‘Hugh is there,’ said James.

‘Oh, yes, but I shouldn’t leave it all to him,’ said Arthur, as he prepared to come down, evidently caring little either way for Hugh’s presence, and less for his own heavy eyes and white face. He did not heed who saw the tokens of a grief that could surprise no one. He wanted to show respect to Mysie’s cousin. Mr. Crofton was a kind, sensible-looking clergyman, and when James said nervously: ‘This is my cousin Arthur, Mr. Crofton,’ he could hardly utter a commonplace greeting as he pressed the hand Arthur held out to him.

Hugh set his mouth hard and sat quite still in his corner. Arthur said simply : 'I am glad to see you, Mr. Crofton,' and sat down by Hugh on the sofa, but without giving him any special greeting ; and then asked some little question about Mr. Crofton's journey.

Mr. Crofton had two or three sons, and as many daughters. He held a small living, and he had never seen the little cousin whose fortune he had inherited ; but as he heard Arthur's gentle, courteous voice, and saw his young face with its heavy shadows, he felt as if the inevitable sense of relief that had come to him at the first had been a deadly sin. He hardly knew to whom to address himself, but before Arthur's arrival he had managed to make them understand that all Mysie's personal property, all her ornaments, every relic of herself, must still belong to those who had loved and lost her ; and Mrs. Crichton now spoke a little of how

much she had been loved, and how many tokens of grief had been shown both by rich and poor.

‘There will be crowds to-morrow,’ she said.

‘That can be put a stop to,’ said Hugh, suddenly.

‘My dear Hugh ! Surely not !’

‘I should not have thought you would have wished to gratify idle curiosity. Under the circumstances we cannot keep it too much to ourselves,’ said Hugh, unable to bear the thought of meeting the eyes of all the village.

‘I should like everyone to come who wishes it,’ said Arthur.

‘It was for your sake I spoke,’ said Hugh.

‘I? I shall not mind ! There are so many who—who—I am sure Mr. Crofton will excuse me now,’ he added abruptly, as he got up and went away.

‘You forget,’ said Hugh, ‘how public all this has become. We shall have newspaper reporters and all the tag-rag of Oxley.’

‘It cannot be helped,’ said his mother, ‘and you should not put it into Arthur’s head to mind it.’

‘He will not care,’ said Hugh; ‘why should he? He will have plenty of sympathy from them all.’

‘He will not care, indeed,’ said James, indignantly.

James was wrong. When Arthur saw lane and churchyard and church itself filled with those who had loved Mysie the sense of sympathy struck no discordant note, just as the blue unclouded sky and the happy sunlight did not mock his sorrow, but seemed only a fitting tribute to her happy life. Arthur felt a sense of friendly fellow-feeling, as if the love and the flowers and the sunlight were part of the brightness he could hardly feel to be gone for ever; but he

could not have described afterwards one tearful face, one flowery wreath—perhaps he hardly distinguished one word in the solemn service, which yet he felt to be right and fitting, and which did soothe him with a sense of union with Mysie, and of the existence of a support of which he might one day take hold.

But Hugh's intense self-consciousness gave to everything the vivid and yet weird distinctness of objects seen in an electric light. Every sob that he heard, every token of affection, seemed to him a reproach. He was conscious of Arthur's every movement, and of every anxious look which his mother and James cast at him ; he realised far more intensely than his cousin how pitiful it was that the earth should fall on this bright young creature, and that her story should break off short in the early chapters. He realised this till the tears came to his eyes, and, though he was probably the only person

present who cared whether his grief were noticed or not, everyone went home to say how vain his efforts at self-control had been.

The long day was over ; they had parted with Mr. Crofton, Arthur showing him the little attentions that Hugh wondered he could recollect at such a moment—the week which seemed to join on to no other weeks was over, and they must begin life again. Any change was welcome to Hugh's restlessness ; and to the others—Jem especially—the lightening of the outward signs of mourning, the resumption of ordinary habits, was a relief. But to Arthur it brought the first sense of irretrievable loss, the first necessity for any effort to put aside the grief which he had borne, indeed, without resistance, but under which he could not stand upright.

For the first time he shrank from them all, for the first time the sunlight seemed cruel, and kind words like blows ; the Sunday bells brought memories that he

could not bear, and he shut himself into his room, only begging to be left there in peace. Hugh went to church with the younger ones—what right had he to spare himself any pain?

The day turned chilly and gloomy, and they gathered in the drawing-room in the afternoon. George and Frederica went to church again for the sake of something to do; but they could not go to the Rectory afterwards, and came home to find their aunt, James, and Miss Venning gathered round a small, unaccustomed-looking fire, with some tea on the table, while Hugh sat at the far end of the long room by himself.

‘How is Arthur?’ asked Frederica.

‘He has a bad headache,’ replied James.

‘Do you think he is going to be ill, Jem?’

‘Oh, no; I hope not. I don’t think it’s likely.’

‘Mother,’ said Hugh, coming forward,

‘Arthur ought to go away somewhere at once.’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs. Crichton, ‘I think he should. We all must as soon as we can manage it.’

‘Yes,’ said Hugh, with a sudden sense of relief, ‘and I would go to the Bank-house and stay there.’

‘I don’t see any need for that. Miss Venning and I have been talking. I thought we might all go to the sea till the holidays were over. Miss Venning kindly promises to come with us, and then she would take Freddie back as a boarder for the next term—poor child, it is too sad for her here.’

‘Oh, auntie, I had much rather be sad,’ interposed Frederica, with a burst of tears.

‘No, darling—nonsense. I could not have that. Jem, I suppose, must go back to town.’

‘On Thursday,’ said Jem.

‘But I am sure the rest of us had better keep together.’

‘I shall be much too busy to leave home,’ said Hugh, with an emphasis that made Jem smile. ‘I shall do very well by myself.’

Mrs. Crichton began to discuss the rival merits of Hastings and Brighton, while Hugh went back to his place, and James and Miss Venning exchanged a few words as to how far the arrangement would be good for Arthur, when, rather to their surprise, Arthur himself came in.

He sat down on the sofa by his aunt, and she asked him tenderly if his head was better.

‘Oh, yes, thank you. How cold it is—the fire looks pleasant.’

‘You must have some tea—Freddie!’

But Freddie’s tears choked her and upset her aunt too; while Miss Venning hastily interposed and poured out the tea. Arthur

got up and handed it, and tried to make a little talk, seconded by Jem, till Mrs. Crichton said:

‘My dear boy, we have been talking about going away. It will be good for you to have a change.’

‘I don’t want to go away,’ said Arthur, languidly.

‘My dear, it would never do for you to stay here. We all want the break.’

‘Why do you urge him to do anything he does not like?’ said Hugh, so abruptly as to make Arthur start.

‘Hugh! I did not see you!’ he said.

‘I am going out. Mother, there is no need for Arthur to go away unless he likes.’

‘But, Hugh, nothing could be so bad for health or spirits as staying here.’

‘I daresay Aunt Lily is right, Hugh,’ said Arthur, as if he wanted to stop the discussion. ‘But, you see, I don’t quite know where I could go to.’

‘Why, with us, my dear, to be sure,’ said Mrs. Crichton, as she explained the plan proposed. ‘Should you like it, Arthur?’

‘Oh, yes. I daresay it would do quite well. Please don’t talk about it,’ he added, more fretfully than he often spoke, ‘at least not now.’

Hugh saw that well-intentioned consolation or cheering would only worry the poor boy, who was not able to respond to it, and that he was hardly fit even for the change proposed; and for a moment the thought flashed across him of how he would devote himself to soothe Arthur’s grief if he could have him to himself for a little, how he, of his own bitter experience, would know how to treat the fitful spirits that would only perplex the rest. Only for a moment; the next he thought how intolerable the sight of that grief would be, and how his own unwelcome presence must increase it.

‘You must do just as you like,’ he re-

peated as he went out of the room. As he walked up and down on the terrace outside he saw Arthur wander away from the others and sit down on the distant sofa that he had left. Presently Snap followed him, and jumped up on his lap. Arthur coaxed and caressed him, and played with him in a sad, aimless sort of fashion, and at last laid his head back on the cushions, with the dog nestling against him. Hugh watched every weary, restless movement with an intensity of sympathy that seemed to feel how the temples throbbed and the eyes ached, and how the wretchedness seemed to increase every hour. And yet he could not say one gentle, tender word. At last the stillness proved that Arthur had fallen asleep—worn out, perhaps, with the excitement of the day before. But Hugh paced up and down in the chilly, windy twilight, and longed for the time when they would all have gone and he would be left to himself.

CHAPTER XX.

FLOSSY.

‘And life looks dark
Where walked we friend with friend.’

A GREAT sorrow affects the lives of many other people besides those most immediately concerned, and this not only in the greater or lesser degrees of grief that it may cause, or in the change which it may make in more than one set of circumstances, but in the fact that no great event can come within our ken without presenting life in a new aspect and more or less making a change in ourselves.

Redhurst was changed, utterly and for ever, by Mysie Crofton's death ; and with the

change in Redhurst there came a great change to many another homestead, a great piece of brightness and pleasantness went out of many lives.

The old Rector and his wife would miss her when they gathered their flowers and ate their fruit; the village girls would miss her at church and at school; her own school-fellows in far-away homes would sadden at the tidings; and Florence Venning might well grieve for the loss of her best-loved pupil and friend.

She grieved for her, when once her senses were set free from the stupefying shock of the sudden tidings, with all the energy of her energetic nature. She sorrowed, as she worked and as she rejoiced—with all her might. It was holiday time, and she had no duties to distract her. Miss Venning was at Redhurst. Clarissa, though somewhat appalled by the violence of her grief, could think of no better course to

pursue than to let her alone ; and Flossy, all the first day, shut herself into her room, and wept and sobbed, feeling as if the world had come to an end for her and for everyone she cared about. It was the first grief that she had ever realised, for she had been too young to feel acutely her parents' death ; and, perhaps, the fact that it was not exactly her own grief, greatly as it grieved her, made her, as the days went by, more prone to moralise about it. She had seen sorrow, read about it, thought about it, and tried to comfort it. She was not particularly ignorant of the world ; their large school connection brought her into contact with many events and many people ; and parish work, seriously pursued, teaches girls more of the realities of life than is commonly supposed. She had sympathised with great sorrows, understood great difficulties, and yet now for the first time the sense came to her of what those sorrows had been. How had

she dared to try to comfort those who were feeling as she now felt, and not only as she felt, but as she now understood those nearer and dearer must feel. *This* was sorrow. Could even she take comfort in the thoughts she herself had often suggested ; and what comfort could they be to her unhappy friends ?

She had often said that the only comfort in sorrow was religion. Now she knew what sorrow meant ; did she know what religion meant too ? It was a matter of course in these days that so intelligent and so earnest-minded a girl should care about the subject ; and Flossy was not only critical of different shades of Church opinion, but held her own with great ardour and no want of reality, impressing them strongly on the young girls whom she sought to influence, and possibly arguing about them more forcibly than meekly. More than this, she dutifully followed the practices and principles

they enjoined. And now what did her religion do for her? Perhaps she did not altogether realise the Help to which she looked, but, at least, she felt the necessity of it to the very bottom of her soul. She had not herself sounded the depths of grief, she did not soar to the heights of consolation; but at least she looked the grief and the great Comfort full in the face.

But Flossy's thoughts were soon turned away from herself to those more immediately concerned. She envied Miss Venning her place among them, and cared for nothing but the accounts she sent of the life at Redhurst from day to day.

Little as she guessed it, there was something in the wild mournful pathos of the story, in the picturesqueness of its incidents, in the admiration which Arthur's reported gentleness and patience inspired, that did lift it into the regions of romance, and made its exceeding pitifulness a little more bearable

to one so young as Flossy, as long as she was not brought into actual contact with it ; something that harmonised with the truer and deeper consolation that came with the thought of Mysie's goodness and innocence, and that made that sunshiny funeral, with its scent of flowers, its sound of music, and its crowd of young faces, a time not absolutely miserable ; a recollection that might soften into tenderness, and brighten, perhaps, to the perfect day. But it was with a sense of nothing but the absolute piteous reality of loss and change that she walked up to Redhurst with Clarissa to wish them all good-bye before the final break-up of the household, becoming conscious of nothing but the determination not to cry and so add to the pain with which they might meet her. She forgot how well they were accustomed to the atmosphere of sorrow that struck on her with such a chill ; and when Mrs. Crichton, seeing her agitation, caressed her and spoke tenderly

of her love for their lost darling, Flossy felt as if everyone but herself were capable of efforts of unselfish self-control. While she was listening to James's explanation of their future plans, and how he had got his leave extended for a day or two to see them off to Bournemouth, suddenly, without warning, Arthur came into the room. She had not expected to see him, and as he came forward rather hastily and took her hand, colouring up a little, she wondered that he looked so like himself.

‘I did not know you were here,’ he said, and then she heard how the life and ring had gone out of his voice. She could not speak a word, and turned quite white, a strange thing in the pink-faced Flossy.

‘Did you want me, Arthur?’ said James.

‘No, I don't want anything, thank you.’

He turned away to speak to Clarissa, and Flossy moved into the window, and stood

looking out and seeing nothing. Presently she heard Arthur's voice at her side.

‘Flossy, I wish to give you this. Aunt Lily thinks you would like it.’

Flossy looked, and saw by the shape of the case in his hand that it contained some turquoise ornaments which Mysie had been very fond of wearing.

‘Oh, no, no, Arthur,’ she burst out, vehement and outspoken as ever, even then ; ‘not those. I never, *never* could put them on. I have her old school-books and some music. I want nothing.’

‘But keep this,’ he said, ‘I know *she* would have wished it.’

Flossy yielded then. She took hold of Arthur's hand and squeezed it hard, but she could not speak of her own grief in the presence of his ; and he soon moved away, as if he had done what he wanted to do and was indifferent to anything else.

‘Flossy,’ whispered Frederica, ‘come out

with me. Oh,' she continued, as they came into the garden, 'I shall be so glad to go to Bournemouth. It is dreadful here. Only I can't think what we shall do with Arthur—Aunt Lily and I. He likes best to be with Jem, or quite alone.'

'Mary told us how beautifully he behaves.'

'Oh, yes; but it is so difficult to know what he likes. Hush, there's Hugh!'

Taken utterly by surprise Flossy started, with a half-shrinking movement, and, though she recovered herself in a moment and held out her hand, Hugh turned away as if he had not meant to be seen, and was gone at once.

'There!' cried Frederica, passionately; '*You* feel it too! They may say what they like. I hate him, and so does George; and I wish he would go away and never come back!'

'That is not right, Freddie. I ought

not to have started—it must be worst of all for him.’

‘I don’t believe it! I know just how it was; Hugh is so conceited, and so interfering! He ought to be sorry and to know we all hate the sight of him.’

Frederica’s intolerant girlish harshness gave Flossy a shock.

‘Hush,’ she said; ‘whatever you think, what Hugh must feel is far beyond and above anything we can understand, and we must not talk about “ought” and “ought not.”’

‘Aunt Lily says it is nonsense to say he had anything to do with it; but I know he thinks so himself.’

‘Then, that is enough, without your discussing it,’ said Flossy, with a sense of irreverence in thus roughly handling events so terrible. She *did* shrink at the thought of Hugh, but she would not have said so for the world.

Frederica was silenced, but she and her younger brother indulged secretly in much discussion and comment, the excitement of which relieved their dreary hours a little; and Hugh felt the little pricks their childish displeasure gave him. That Arthur showed none of it he attributed to a determination to avoid paining him. Had not Florence Venning shrunk away from him? Jem had fallen into Mrs. Crichton's policy of refusing to recognise any special reason for his unhappiness, and was taken up in softening matters as far as possible for Arthur; so that he was only too thankful to talk occasionally to his brother on other subjects, and with stifling slight pangs of regret that he had used up all his leave without that little run down to the cathedral town where Arch-deacon Hayward resided, and without that Sunday when he went to church with Miss Helen and indulged his distant admiration for her.

On the afternoon after Flossy's visit he remained in the drawing-room alone, reading the paper, for the others had dispersed. Jem sometimes wrote as well as read the papers, and as he perused an art-critique, from which he differed fundamentally, an answer to adorn the pages of the rival journal began to seethe in his brain. He could not help feeling that tones and tints, lights and shades, on canvas, would be a great relief from the overpowering feelings of real life. He murmured to himself: 'If accuracy of drawing and truth of colour are to be sacrificed to a—to a meretricious prettiness and a false——

'Oh, Jem, look here, read this!' exclaimed Arthur, coming hastily up to him with a letter in his hand. 'Don't you remember Fred Seton, who went to India?'

'What, a light-haired fellow, who came to see you one Christmas? Yes, what of him?'

‘He has been very ill; he is coming home on sick leave. He wants me to meet him at Marseilles.’

James remembered dimly that Arthur had always entertained a strong friendship for this Fred Seton, and had greatly regretted his going to India some two or three years before. He read the letter, which was written evidently in bad health and spirits and in ignorance of Arthur’s engagement, begging him, if possible, to come out and meet him.

‘You know, Jem, his people are all dead. He is such a lonely fellow—I must go.’

‘But, Arthur, it’s such a dreary errand for you just now,’ said James. ‘If Seton should be worse when you meet him—or you yourself——’

‘I shall not be ill, if that is what you mean. And, Jem, it would be *some* object. What could I do with myself at Bourne-mouth?’

‘No, that’s true,’ said James. ‘I feel that. But, my dear boy, I don’t like your going away alone to meet no one knows what, when you want looking after so much yourself.’

‘No one can help me,’ said Arthur. ‘What *can* my life be to me? You’re all so good, but the light has gone down for me. Let me go; it will be change—something to look forward to. And I am quite well. I can eat and sleep. I could walk any distance. I must go.’

‘Well, I suppose you must, but mother will hate the notion.’

‘Will you talk her over? Somehow, I can’t bear to be talked to about myself.’

James found his task very difficult. Mrs. Crichton naturally entertained a thousand fears for Arthur’s health and spirits, but he was reinforced by Hugh.

‘Let him go; of course, if he wishes it. If he *can* care for any fresh object it will be

the best cure. Let him do exactly as he likes now and henceforward. I daresay the change will distract his mind and do him good.'

They were kind words, but there was something hard and sarcastic in the tone in which they were uttered.

'I wish you could have a change too,' said Jem, looking at him.

'Changes don't make much difference to me,' said Hugh; 'perhaps they may to Arthur.'

Mrs. Crichton had resolved that the division of poor Mysie's little belongings should be made at once, and she was right in thinking that it would cost Arthur far less pain now than at any future time. There was no use, she thought, in allowing haunting memories to have a local habitation; and she secretly determined that, during their absence, the house should so be rearranged as to leave no sacred corners; while there was nothing

startling *now* in the sight of Mysie's books and jewels, when all their hearts were full of Mysie herself.

Arthur was grateful for having been allowed to have his own way so easily, but even while he arranged his journey with Jem, and felt how intolerable the Bournemouth scheme would have been to him, his heart almost failed him—the long journey seemed such a trouble—and how utterly, how immeasurably sad this turning away from his old life made him! For, young as he was, the loss was as the loss of a wife—it was the dividing of that which had been whole, the changing of every detail of his days. It was not disappointed passion: what lay before him was not life with a dark painful memory in one corner of it; it was life under conditions of which he had never dreamed. It was not that his old delights and hopes had become distasteful, but that they had ceased to exist. He had decided

to go to London with Jem, starting late on the Friday evening, and go on to Marseilles on the Saturday; and on the Friday afternoon Hugh, coming back from the bank, found him alone in the drawing-room, sitting there with a mournful, unoccupied look that went to his heart.

‘He will be gone soon,’ thought Hugh, with a sense of infinite relief. However, he came forward, and said :

‘I wanted to ask you, Arthur, have you money enough for this journey?’

‘Oh, yes, thank you; quite enough for the present.’

‘You have only to ask for what you want—of my mother if you like it better.’

‘I’ll ask you,’ said Arthur, gently. ‘I hope you’ll write to me sometimes.’

‘If you wish it.’

‘And, Hugh, will you have this? It was your present to her, I believe.’

He held out to him a little prettily-bound

book, a collection of poetry of which Mysie had been very fond.

‘You are very good to me,’ said Hugh, almost inaudibly and with bent head, not taking the book.

‘Hugh,’ said Arthur, evidently with great effort, ‘I don’t feel as you suppose. I cannot speak of—of that——’

‘No, no, don’t, don’t speak of it. I know what you feel,’ interposed Hugh. ‘Don’t force yourself to anything else for me.’

The long strain on his nerves had made poor Arthur much less capable of self-control than at first; and though he succeeded in saying, as he put his hand on Hugh’s: ‘I don’t force myself; you could not help it’—the shudder of horror at the bare allusion to the fact might well be mistaken by Hugh for a struggle to perform an act of forgiveness. It was agony to Hugh to see him suffer; but, if he could have forgotten

that and tried to soothe the suffering, the misapprehension would have passed away and the real sympathy between them have comforted both. As it was, he felt a pang of humiliation, and was relieved when James's entrance spared him the need of a reply; though he knew that his brother would blame him for Arthur's obvious agitation. As James began to talk, half-coaxingly, about the arrangements for their start, and finally carried Arthur off to have something to eat, the thought that came into Hugh's mind, spite of himself, was : 'He need not wish to change with me, after all.'

PART IV.

CHANCE AND CHANGE.

‘Fresh woods and pastures new!’

CHAPTER XXI.

PRIVATE THEATRICALS.

‘But a trouble weighed upon her
And perplexed her night and morn,
With the burden of an honour
Unto which she was not born.’

BETWEEN the date of Hugh Crichton's return from Italy and the day when he was left alone to set up for himself in the old Bank House barely two months elapsed. Those days that had been for Arthur and Mysie so sweet, so rich and full, had been long days indeed, the long days of summer, but they had been very few in number, so few that the first tints of autumn had not touched the trees when they were over, though the

roses had been fully in bloom when they began. It was still summer, they were still long hot days, when Mysie was buried, and Arthur set forth on his solitary journey, and Florence Venning turned back to her usual pursuits and wished the holidays over, that some sort of life and interest might come back to the Manor again. It was an endless summer, Hugh thought, as he was left alone to reflect on all that it had brought to him, and wondered—in the intervals of wondering how Arthur managed to shift for himself, and how far change of scene would affect his trouble—in betweenwhiles he wondered if the opera season at Civita Bella were over and the manager and his *prima donna* had had time for their wedding.

It was a long summer, too, in Civita Bella, for Violante had to live through the days though Hugh Crichton was gone; there were still seven in each week, and they brought many incidents with them.

She had offended Signor Vasari—not mortally, perhaps; not without hope of restoration to his favour; but so that he determined to punish her and her family by the temporary withdrawal of his suit. With all her shortcomings she was too valuable to him, and perhaps he was too much in love with her, for an entire break, but he intended to make her feel his displeasure. Her failures were no longer treated with indulgence, and her stage life was made indeed hard to her. Perhaps in so acting he gave her a shield against his pertinacity, in the passionate resentment which such conduct excited; and, had this been the only battle which Violante had to fight, there might have been fire enough in her nature to help her through with it. She could not be scornful, but she could be utterly, passively indifferent, absolutely unconscious of the little flags of truce he now and then held out, careless whether he praised or blamed.

So she appeared at first ; but, though she was not much afraid of Signor Vasari, she was very much afraid of her own father, and, in these languid weary days, she often justly incurred his displeasure.

When Hugh turned away in anger, she felt as if nothing could ever matter to her again ; but the habit of seeing professional engagements fulfilled at all costs all her life, and knowing that no amount of disinclination made it possible to break them, prevented her, there being no perversity in her nature, from giving way to her longing for quiet and rest.

But, though she did everything that she was told to do, a sort of dead weight of incapacity seemed to have fallen upon her. She forgot the music that she had learnt already, and a fresh part she was utterly unable to master. She gave her time to it, but with no result. Rosa did not wonder that Signor Mattei exclaimed, in a transport

of indignation, that he had never had so perverse a pupil as his own daughter. Every performance seemed to cost Violante more and to be less successful than the last, and the private rehearsals on which Signor Mattei insisted were worst of all, since she could scarcely speak, much less act, in his presence.

There they were one morning: Signor Mattei with an opera score in his hand, singing, acting, dancing about, scolding, gesticulating, running his hands through his hair; and Violante, white, trembling, and motionless, with her little hands dropped before her and her eyes utterly blank; Rosa, who had had a hard time of it of late, at work in a corner. She had not been in the habit of seeing Violante practise her acting, as her father had only recently insisted on these private performances, and they were a revelation to her of the extent of her sister's incapacity.

‘What possesses the child,’ she thought, herself almost angry. ‘If I had half her voice, let alone her beauty, I would have sung every soprano part on the stage by this time! Ah, if I only had! She *is* stupid. It must be sheer fright. Oh dear! there she is singing that coquettish bit like a dirge. What will father say to her? I wonder if I could make her see how to do it—it seems such incredible incapacity. And she is not in good voice either—how should she be, poor child?’

And Rosa’s lips moved, and her face assumed half-unconsciously the expression appropriate to the part.

‘Violante! It is incredible, most incredible. Here am I a lamb of meekness and mildness. I am not going to beat you, child. Santa Madonna! I really believe I could; you are as obstinate as a mule. Laugh, child, laugh—smile; you can do that. Eleven o’clock! I must go to my pupils,

and I am tired to death already. Don't tell me you have tried—No, Rosa—no excuses. See that she knows it better when I come back ;' and, flinging the score across the room in his irritation, Signor Mattei departed.

'Oh, Violante!' exclaimed Rosa, 'what can possess you? I have seen you do it a thousand times better than that.'

Violante stood where her father had left her, with scared stupid eyes and listless figure. She turned slowly, and, sitting down on the floor by Rosa's side, laid her head against her knee, as if stillness and silence were all she cared for. Rosa was afraid to probe to the bottom of her distress; what could she say about Hugh that could do any good? That must be left to time, and she must address herself to the matter in hand.

'Come now,' she said, cheerfully, 'how is it that you sang so badly this morning?'

'I don't know,' said Violante, 'it is always so.'

‘Is it because father frightens you?’

‘That makes it worse—but I cannot understand what he wants.’

‘Well, Violante, I don’t think you can. And yet it seems so easy. Oh, dear, if I had your voice——’

‘I wish you had it!’

‘Hush—I won’t have you say that; but it seems so strange. Why, don’t you *want* to say the words rightly?’

‘Oh, yes!’ said Violante, misunderstanding.

‘I mean,’ cried Rosa, eagerly, don’t you feel as if you *were* Zerlina, as if it had all happened to yourself—doesn’t it seem real to you?’

‘No!’

‘Why, it carries me away even to see you do it. Why! I could express *so* all sorts of feelings. Don’t you know, Violante, there is so much within us that cannot come out, and art—music—acting is a means of

expressing it. I should feel myself that I—
I myself—had offended my lover, and
wanted to coax him to be friends. Don't
you see ?'

'I never would !' said Violante, half to
herself. 'I never could !'

'I don't believe you have a scrap of
imagination,' cried Rosa, growing excited.
'Of course, it is not the same thing. Can't
you translate your feelings into the other
girl's nature. You *have* feelings. Now I
would show through my acting all that must
be buried else. When I came to happy scenes
acting them would be something like happi-
ness, sad ones would be a relief, and if—
only if—Violante, I had ever cared for any-
one, I should know how to say those words,
and even the shadow of the past would be
sweet——'

'Oh, Rosa,' faltered Violante, hot and
shame-faced, 'as if *he* could remind me——'

Rosa came suddenly down from her

tirade, perceiving how utterly it fell flat.

‘My darling, I meant nothing to distress you. If you don’t understand me, never mind.’ ‘But,’ she added, half to herself, ‘if you had the soul of an actress in you, you would.’

‘Do you think, Rosa,’ said Violante, after a pause, in low reflective accents, ‘that anyone *could* be coaxed to make friends?’

‘Why, yes, I suppose so,’ said Rosa, lightly. ‘You see it succeeded in the case of Masetto.’

‘That is only a play,’ said Violante, in a tone of contempt.

‘Ah, well, Violante, real life certainly doesn’t work itself out quite like a play. But it was of plays we were talking, you know.’

‘Yes. Rosa mia, I am not so silly but that I can tell the difference between my own acting and other people’s. It is not

only that I am frightened—and unhappy—it is that I cannot do it. Do you think I could ever learn how?’

There was not a shade of pique or of mortified pride in the anxious, humble question, and Rosa could not help fancying that even in sweet Violante nothing but utter indifference and incapacity could have made failure so endurable.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘I don’t suppose you will ever make a great hand at it; but I should think you might get to act well enough not to spoil your singing if you were stronger and less frightened.’

‘Can you tell me—I am sure you could act?’

‘Yes,’ said Rosa, with a colour in her cheeks, and an odd light in her eyes, ‘I believe—I am sure I could. But I have no voice, there is no good in it. I never think of it now. However, stand up. Just sing through Masetto’s part, and I will be Zerlina.

I know the music, but I shall croak like a raven. Now, then.'

In another moment Violante started with surprise, for, without change of dress, Rosa seemed to have disappeared, and the half-coquettish, half-penitent peasant-girl, who, bewildered for a moment by Don Giovanni's flatteries, still is at heart faithful to her own lover, was there in her stead. She ran up to the amazed Violante, face and gesture full of pathetic entreaty. True, her voice was weak and harsh, but a hundred bits of by-play, which Violante had never dreamed of, seemed to come by nature—her face flushed, her eyes beamed.

'Rosa, it is marvellous! How can you do it?'

'Oh,' said Rosa, recalled, 'I am only showing you. Don't you see?—Now, do you try.'

'No, no—go on. The scene with Don Giovanni, that is what I cannot manage.'

‘Oh, where he makes love to her, and she is just a little inconstant to Masetto. Very well, you are Don Giovanni,’ and Rosa’s hesitating coquetry, struggle with herself, and bewitching airs were so surprising that Violante exclaimed :

‘Why, I never saw you look so before.’

‘No, of course not—I am not Rosa—I am Zerlina. However, you don’t know what I may have done in my time—when I was young.’

‘But you do it so beautifully. Ah, what a pity you have not my voice—you would be the greatest *prima donna* in Italy!’

‘Do you think so?’ said Rosa, gratified. ‘But, ah, I have no voice, so there is no chance for me here. I do believe I should have gone on the stage if I had stayed in England; that is, I thought so once.’

‘I know now,’ said Violante, ‘that I shall never be an actress; never.’

‘Oh, but I think you can do something. Look at me.’

And Rosa, nothing loth, went through the different pieces, Violante imitating her with sufficient success, now that she was quite at her ease, to put her in better spirits, as Rosa gave abundant praise to her efforts.

‘Ecco,’ said Violante, ‘you shall be Don Giovanni, and I will be Zerlina; then I shall see if I can remember what you have told me.’

Rosa caught up an old hat of their father’s, set it sideways on her brow, twisted a scarf dexterously across her shoulders, delighted at making Violante laugh.

It was a pretty scene in the hot, shady room: Rosa in her fantastic dress, her eyes bright, her face full of ardour, acting the part with a force and fervour that seemed marvellous to Violante; and the slender, delicate, white-robed girl, with her bird-like voice, and natural grace that yet lent itself

so imperfectly to the gestures and smiles she was trying to copy, so little inspired by the fictitious character and feeling that Don Giovanni's vehement and characteristic wooing made her hang her head and blush, forgetful of the coquettish response intended.

Rosa, who had been utterly absorbed in her part, stopped, laughing, and sympathising with the great singer who could not act with Mademoiselle Mattei, while she owned the tribute to her skill.

‘Look at me, dear; you are only pretending to be shy, you know. No, not that great innocent stare—through your eye-lashes, *so*. Must I teach my little sister to “make eyes,” as the English say?’

Violante laughed, and the laugh made the next attempt more successful; and in the midst of Rosa's animated response an unexpected voice cried:

‘Brava! bravissima! Why, Rosa, *figlia mia*, who would have thought it?’

‘Oh, father, look at her, she acts so beautifully,’ cried Violante, clasping her hands; while Rosa, in her turn confused, paused, colouring deeply.

‘Ay, ay! go on, girls; let me see.’

‘Courage, courage,’ whispered Rosa, and, in the desire to show off her sister, Violante coquetted with praiseworthy archness.

‘She can do it now, father, can’t she?’

‘Ay, that is better; but you—oh, if the Saints had given you a voice! Again, Rosina mia, here—stand aside, child—play her part, Rosa. I am Don Giovanni.’

Signor Mattei was no contemptible actor, and through the chief parts of half-a-dozen operas he conducted Rosa, praising, encouraging, clapping his hands, as he found how she responded to his hints; while Rosa seemed unwearied. At last he exclaimed: ‘It is excellent, most excellent! a real talent, and a face and figure that would make up well. She would be more effective

than the child, after all. Now, Violante, you see what it is to have sense.'

'Oh, it is splendid!' said Violante, warmly. 'If her voice was better——'

'Ah, yes, if such a gift was not wasted on her sister. But this is talent, and my heart is warmed—it is on fire with delight! Brava, Rosina!' and Signor Mattei extended his arms and clasped Rosa in them, after a fashion not unsuitable to their recent performances. Violante, as he turned away, sprang to her sister's side.

'Oh, Rosa, how pleased he is with you!'

'I wish he was as pleased with you, my darling,' said Rosa. 'What a generous little thing you are to look so happy!'

'But I am so glad,' said Violante, while Rosa sat down and took up her work sedately, but presently let it fall and leant back with dreamy eyes and smiling lips. Years ago, when she was a very young girl, to be an actress had been the dream of her

life. While she learnt and taught in England she had dreamt of hard work for a great object, of the excitement to be found in the use of conscious power, of success, of fame. Then had arisen in her life other, and yet sweeter hopes, which too soon were destined to be destroyed, and then came the obvious duty of returning to take charge of Violante. Since then her want of a voice had, in Italy, been an entire bar to her attempting to take to the stage as a mode of earning her living, and she had never till lately realised that Violante's distaste was anything but shy childish fear. *Now* it did seem to her that such a career might offer some consolation even for Hugh Crichton's desertion; *now* she felt how she would have valued what to Violante was utter misery. She looked at the girl who, wearied with the exertion of the morning, had dropped asleep on the cushioned window-seat, and a misgiving that had often

occurred lately began to deepen in her mind.

Would not the question soon be decided for them—could so delicate a creature bear the strain of long uncongenial effort, added to the trial of wearing disappointment?—in short, would not health and strength go after spirits and energy? Violante's daily-increasing languor and listlessness made this only too probable.

CHAPTER XXII.

LOST.

‘ Silence, beautiful voice !
Be still, for you only trouble the mind
With a joy in which I cannot rejoice,
A glory I shall not find ! ’

ROSA's fears were fulfilled. For a few days, with the help of her sister's teaching, Violante struggled on a little more bravely ; but Rosa's lessons, however carefully conned at home, were forgotten in the hot, glaring theatre, where fear and exhaustion seemed to stifle sense and memory. She was too much afraid of her father to tell him that she was too ill to sing, and she sang badly and incurred deserved rebuke. She was too

imperfect a performer to have much ground of her own to stand upon; and her father did not save her in any way from the consequences of her shortcomings. She was far less beautiful now that her delicate bloom was gone, and her voice, her one possession, was growing harsh and strained. What wonder, when she not only cried herself asleep at night, but cried herself awake again in the morning—a far colder and drearier thing?

Rosa was at her wit's end, but Signor Vasari's patience was worn to its last thread, and her father was utterly impracticable. Violante ceased to complain, but her soft, tender eyes had a desperate look, and her sweet confiding ways had grown solitary and strange. What would be the end of it?

It hardly caused Rosa surprise when, one night, in the midst of a performance, Violante fainted. The representation was brought to

an abrupt conclusion, and Mademoiselle Mattei declared to be too ill to appear again. The public of Civita Bella was sorry ; somehow the soft, lovely girl had gained a hold on their affections ; but through the days while she lay ill and unconscious there was much wrangling between her father and the manager as to the amount of her salary to be forfeited by her non-fulfilment of her engagement. All talk of any tenderer relation had been dropped, and the discussion was settled greatly to Signor Mattei's dissatisfaction. He felt that he had been ill-treated. Violante's further gains were gone for that season ; his own hung on a thread ; some of Rosa's best pupils, like Emily Tollemache, had left the place. What was to become of them ?

As he came in, with his head full of all these various annoyances, he encountered Rosa standing in the sitting-room, holding in her hand the soft, dusky lengths of Violante's hair.

‘You have not cut off her hair?’ he exclaimed, wrathfully.

‘It may save her life,’ said Rosa, whose eyes were red with crying. ‘She—she *may* not die.’

Then Signor Mattei, realising for the first time that his child’s life was in danger, burst out with vehement lamentations.

She had been his hope and his pride, spite of all her wilfulness—should he never hear her angel’s voice again?—and he seized on the long, soft hair, and kissed it and cried over it.

‘It is the singing that has killed her,’ said Rosa, bitterly. ‘If you had listened to her entreaties—’ she checked herself, feeling the reproach to be cruel and undutiful; but, with a certain hard common-sense, developed by a life in which she had seen many illusions fade, revolting against the sentiment, coming, as it seemed, too late.

‘No!’ cried Signor Mattei. ‘It is not

the singing. It is that young Englishman for whom she has pined away. And you—you permitted her to know and to see him, and encouraged her in her folly !’

‘ This is no time for quarrelling, father,’ said Rosa, as she turned away, and went back to her sister, feeling as if, with Violante, every ray of sunshine would fade out of her life.

But Violante did not die. Either there was more power of resistance in her nature than they could have supposed, or Rosa’s tender nursing triumphed over fever and weakness ; for after some weeks of illness she began slowly to recover. She was long in gaining strength. She seemed contented in a sort of passive fashion, was grateful and caressing to Rosa ; but she never talked of anything but the matter in hand, never spoke of the opera or her singing, or of Hugh ; never showed any feeling except that, when she came sufficiently to herself to know that her

hair had been cut off, she had cried and seemed sorry. Rosa was ready to follow her lead ; but a great anxiety, unacknowledged even to himself, was growing up in Signor Mattei's heart. Her voice—was it coming back ?

He had not the heart or the courage to speak to her directly on the subject, but he hummed opera airs in her presence, and watched wistfully to see if she noticed them. Violante started and coloured.

‘Rosa mia,’ she whispered, ‘I do not want to hear them yet ;’ and her father tried to ascribe her reluctance to a share in his alarm.

‘So,’ he said one day, coming in from a rehearsal, ‘that Giulia Belloni has a fine voice, her Zerlina is effective—effective to the vulgar.’

‘Oh, I am glad,’ said Violante, ‘for now they will not miss me.’

‘Violante, will you never cease to be a

fool? Not miss you? I would have them miss you every night. And this woman can act, laugh, scream—has eyes that show their size ten times as far as yours. But her voice is of far commoner sort, at least.'

Violante had quivered at her father's rough address.

'Father,' she said, 'I have no voice now.'

'It will return—it will return soon. You must practise——'

'She must not think of it,' interposed Rosa. 'She is not nearly strong enough yet.'

'Ah, soon; but in good time—There comes il signor dottore.'

The doctor, whose visits to Violante had not yet ceased, would have given much to evade the question as to how soon Mdlle. Mattei would recover her voice; but it was sharply pressed on him by Signor Mattei. Violante lay still, her hands pressed together,

her large eyes full of suspense and anxiety. The doctor thought most pitifully of her, the young, delicate girl, whose career had received so severe a check; but yet her feelings to those of her eager father were 'but as moonlight unto sunlight, and as water unto wine.'

'She will sing again,' said the father.

'Mademoiselle Mattei must not attempt to sing in public for a long time to come. She is far too delicate for the exertion. Nothing but rest will give her a chance of recovering her voice.'

'But she will recover it?'

'That is impossible to say. To some degree, should her health return, it is possible that she may; but she must give it rest; she has overstrained it when too weak for the effort.'

'But the time—how long?' cried Signor Mattei, breathlessly.

'I cannot tell,' said the doctor, with a

shrug ; ' but if she attempts to act now it will kill her.'

He spoke forcibly, somewhat irritated by the father's persistence, and then glanced at his patient, anxious to see the effect of his words. Violante had turned very pale, her mouth trembled, she drew a long breath ; but there was a light in her eyes as of one that lays a burden down. Her father turned pale also and was quite silent, not one passionate word rising to his lips. He looked at her ; then, as the doctor left the room, he followed him. Rosa sat down in the window, trying to govern her tears sufficiently to speak to her sister. And Violante ? She had just been told of the loss of her one gift, of the one thing that marked her out from other women, without which she was only a poor, ignorant, helpless girl, with nothing left but a sort of indefinite beauty ; from which her illness had taken much of the charm. She leant back on her pillows,

feeling very small and mean and foolish, like Cinderella when the clock struck twelve. She felt very good-for-nothing, and yet—and yet—no more of the weary rehearsals, the hateful companionship, the terror and fatigue, the glare of the gas, the jealousy or scorn of her rivals, the anger of her father. She was free! It was like being let out of a stifling prison into the chilly air. She shivered and was cold, but she drew long, deep breaths. It was over. She was not ambitious—perhaps she was not conscientious enough to grieve that her task in life was taken from her, though she belonged to too hard-working a family not to think at once that she had lost the power of earning her own living. She felt that she had failed; but it was failure *versus* freedom, and freedom won.

‘Violante—oh, my poor child!’ cried Rosa, as she came up and kissed her tenderly.

‘Rosa mia, do not be sorry for me. I

am sorry, but I am so tired of it all, and now I can rest,' said Violante, pleadingly.

'Rest !' exclaimed Rosa, with hot cheeks. 'If I were you I should be half heart-broken, to lose that beautiful, glorious gift. But it is better that you should not care.'

Violante drooped her head in silence.

'When I *did* break my heart they blamed me,' she thought. 'How can I care *now* ?'

'You cried when I cut your hair off,' said Rosa, unable to repress her own disappointment.

Violante crimsoned to her finger tips. Had not Hugh stroked the long, soft hair? '*He* did not love me only for my voice,' she thought, somewhat unjustly, for Rosa's love was true and tender, and she silenced her regrets, as she saw how they distressed her sister. Violante's momentary flash of indignation passed ; but she kept her thoughts to herself—she was learning to do so.

'There *was* no good in me but my voice,'

she said meekly, 'but I will try and help you, Rosa.'

'Oh, my darling, do not trouble, we shall do well enough,' said Rosa, repentant, when she thought how weak Violante still was, and how impossible any exertion would have been to her. 'It is only of father I am thinking.'

'Father; oh, yes! Go to him! Rosa, I cannot help it.'

'Help it? No! But he will be very sorry. I will go to him. You must lie still and rest.'

Signor Mattei's dream was over; he had lost his vision, as his daughter had lost her lover. Mademoiselle Mattei would never be a household word in any capital in Europe, never contest the palm with those who already bore it. It was a great present, a greater future, loss to him; but it was not the thought of this that made his heart sink

within him. Rosa's common-sense words jarred upon him.

‘It is a grievous pity, father, but it cannot be helped.’

‘She might as well have married the English signor——’

‘Indeed she might!’

‘When she was a little girl, and used to sing about the house, I looked to her success. She had the power, but never the will—never the will! My sun has set, *figlia mia*. I may hide my head in obscurity, and she may be as idle and as happy as she can!’

Extravagant as was the language, there was real distress in his faltering voice and tearful eyes.

‘My beloved art has lost an interpreter,’ he sighed; ‘and I have lost a hope.’

‘Father!’ said an unexpected voice, and Violante, with her slow, feeble step, stood beside him. ‘Father, I am so sorry!’ she said, timidly. ‘I shall be very little good;

but I will help Rosa all I can. And when I am well I will teach.'

'Teach? As if that would repay me!' cried Signor Mattei, starting to his feet. 'Oh, you unfortunate, foolish girl, you were born to be my grief and disappointment! You who might have been a queen of song, *you* pined and fretted for your lover till this has come on you. If you had obeyed me, and consented to Vasari's offer, and been *happy*, this would not have been. But you care nothing, the loss is mine—all mine! And I? See how I love you, you ungrateful child; see the tears you cause to flow.'

Against such reproaches Violante had no defence, and she was so well used to them that she was more frightened than grieved.

'Father,' cried Rosa, 'you have been mistaken, you cannot change her nature, nor make her what you wish. She is herself, take her for that. Violante mia! my

child, my darling, as if it was not enough to have you safe. What matters your voice, or your success, or anything?' she continued, in high indignation. 'Come away; this will make you ill again!'

So they vexed each other sorely; but Violante, forlorn and sorrowful as she was, could nestle in Rosa's arms, and had Rosa's pity, if not sympathy, in her grief; while her father, unkind and unreasonable as he might be, suffered alone a pang of disappointment all the keener because the baffled desire had been so vehement that to indulge it he had undertaken the one impossible task of life—to inspire an alien nature with his own ideal of happiness, his own loves, and his own ambitions.

He thought that it was love for Violante that made her misfortune so terrible to him, but in truth it was love of the ideal that he thought to see her fulfil. He grieved over what she *might* have been, but she was only

a trouble and disappointment to him as she was. He did not intend to be unkind to her, but he could not forbear to reproach her; all the more because he instinctively knew that she did not regret her loss as he did. Violante did not resent this, but the worry and the depressing sense of inefficiency retarded her recovery. Rosa, meanwhile, set herself to consider the family fortunes. What could they do? Her father's engagement to Signor Vasari was almost over and was not likely to be renewed. He often talked of trying new fields, and seeking employment in more important places than Civita Bella. And he was quite well enough known to be likely to find what he wanted. A wandering life would suit him well enough. But though he might have connections in half the towns of Italy, Rosa had none, and how could she afford to lose all her pupils? True, she and Violante might remain where they were, with Maddalena for a duenna ;

but Rosa felt that a thorough change would do Violante more good than anything that could be proposed. She might then recover her strength, and, free from all present trials, would surely soon forget her ill-starred love-story. For Rosa, with cool, clear judgment, reflected that Hugh Crichton, once set free from his entanglement, was very little likely ever to attempt to renew anything so undesirable. He had no means, so far as she knew, of tracing Violante's future life, for the Tollemaches did not write to them after leaving Civita Bella; and of himself, beyond the fact of his profession, and that he lived with his mother at Redhurst, and was a man of some fortune, Rosa knew nothing. She had never even realised where Redhurst might be. As for Violante, unfamiliar with English names and images, she had imbibed no notions of her lover's English home beyond a few descriptions of the garden

and the river; of the great town, whose name even she forgot; and of various people whom she had hardly begun to think of as having any connection with herself—his own relations having been exceedingly uninteresting to Hugh at the period of his courtship. One day of actual betrothal and she would have known enough about them; as it was, Violante had no colours to paint her pictures of his present life, and Rosa felt that he had entirely gone out of theirs.

Under these circumstances she thought very favourably of various former invitations received from her uncle, Mr. Grey, both to herself and Violante. She believed that she could find occupation of some sort in England; and perhaps an English home life for a time might prove beneficial to Violante. In the meantime old Madame Cellini came to the rescue, and offered to take the two girls to a little village called Caletto, some

distance from Civita Bella, where she usually spent some weeks in the autumn. Here Violante would have both rest and change, and when she was fully recovered future plans would be more easily settled.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CALETTO.

‘Grapes which swelled from hour to hour,
And tossed their golden tendrils to the sun
For joy at their own richness.’

AFTER that stormy summer, with its joy and its suffering, its excitement and hard work, there ensued for Violante a time of perfect peace. Golden autumn sunshine, beautiful places, entire freedom and rest, could not give back a lost career, or a lost lover, but they were very conducive to the revival of health and spirits; and the absence even of anything peculiarly delightful was welcome to the exhaustion of worn-out nerves and spirits. Never to be scolded, never to be

frightened, never to be forced to do what she dreaded and disliked, made a sort of Elysium for her, though even Elysium seems to have been sometimes a little objectless and dreary. Still, it was peace; and all the little tastes and occupations which had been crushed down by over-work, or rendered futile by the one absorbing interest of the past summer, began to spring up again; and Violante knitted and worked, picked flowers and arranged them, and made sweetmeats, salads, and coffee, as she had done in the days when the stage was a distant terror, and when Hugh Crichton had never been heard of. For, though she was very easily overwhelmed by storms, she was a flower that opened readily to a little sunshine, and Rosa caught herself wondering whether so soft and childish a creature had really retained the impression that had seemed so powerful. It was hard to tell, for Violante never spoke of her past troubles; the truth,

perhaps, being that she took her sensations very much as they came, and never speculated about herself, nor realised her situation further than she felt it. Rosa hoped that the love, having been very brief, scarcely acknowledged, and utterly crushed at one blow, might really die of want of encouragement; and this was possible, even if its dying hours were soothed by the anodyne of a little unconscious secret hope in the vague future. Since Hugh had been mistaken as to Vasari, some day he *might* find it out; and in the meantime the sun shone, the flowers were sweet, she was the object of much petting, she felt fresh and well, and Vasari, his theatre and his diamonds, had all passed away like a bad dream.

Caletto, with its vineyards, its little lake, its distant hills, its peaceful and yet animated life, was new to the town-bred girl, and very delightful. It attracted a few visitors, but lay somewhat out of the beat of tourists,

though it possessed many charms for them ; one of the chief being a garden belonging to the great house of the place, but which, in the dwindling of the fortunes of the great family, and in their frequent and long absences, was open freely to the scanty public of Caletto. Nay, tables and chairs, where grapes could be eaten and cheap wine drunk, had been placed on the marble terrace that overlooked the lake by the enterprising innkeeper ; and here, within sound of the splash of fountains, under the shade of tall oleander and pomegranate trees, Madame Cellini and her two young charges were wont to establish themselves to see the sun set over the lake and to enjoy the evening air ; and here, in search of the picturesque, or perhaps of that soothing and refreshment which novelty and natural beauty might be supposed to give, arrived one evening an English traveller.

Arthur Spencer's journey to meet his friend had not turned out exactly as he had

intended. He had hurried across France to Marseilles because there was a sort of relief to his misery in the rapid motion ; and, besides, he was not quite certain when Captain Seton's ship would arrive. He was prepared to do anything that his friend might fancy ; returning to England or continuing his journey, as might be best for Captain Seton's health, as to which he did not grow very anxious till he was preparing to enquire for him on board the ship ; when the possibility of finding him worse, in danger, or not finding him at all, occurred to him. Then it seemed to poor Arthur as if the only comfort in his trouble would be the telling it to his kind, warm-hearted friend who had left India too soon to receive even the letter announcing his engagement. Nevertheless, Arthur resolved that if Seton seemed ill and depressed he would prepare a cheerful countenance and keep silence on his own score for the present.

As he came on board and was looking anxiously round, he was greeted with a shout of delight ; and Captain Seton, looking neither ill nor unhappy, seized him by the hands.

‘ So there you are, my dear good fellow ! I’m heartily glad to see you. I knew you would come if you could ; but I feel as if I’d brought you out on false pretences after all.’

‘ So much the better, if this is what being on sick-leave comes to,’ said Arthur. ‘ I was very glad to come.’

‘ Oh, it was no pretence at the beginning ; but the voyage has made another man of me—and—and—let me introduce you to my friends—a—very kind companions on board ship, you know. Mrs. Raymond, Mr. Arthur Spencer—a—Miss Raymond.’

One glance from his friend’s confused yet joyous countenance to the blushing and smiling young lady revealed to Arthur the state of affairs at once ; and, after a few

words had been exchanged, Captain Seton drew him aside, and informed him how Mrs. Raymond, being in bad health, was returning to spend a year in England with her daughter, who had miraculously spent eighteen months in India without getting married; and how he, having met the young lady twice before, and knowing how charming she was ——'

'Exactly so,' interposed Arthur, 'you don't feel inclined now for a tour in Italy.'

'No,' Captain Seton apologised and laughed and explained; but he wanted to escort his lady-love to England, to settle his affairs, and to be introduced to various Raymond relations. Perhaps afterwards ——

Arthur listened, smiled, and congratulated him, and managed to escape without any questions on his own affairs from his pre-occupied friend. He went back to his room at the hotel, and sat down, feeling as if he had lost his one remaining object, and as

if the future were an entire blank. He was almost inclined to go away without seeing Seton again. 'But no,' he thought, 'that would be an unkind, melodramatic sort of proceeding, and he would reproach himself for having given me pain—it would spoil his pleasure.'

So Arthur, feeling that he could not speak of what must come out sooner or later, wrote a note, and told his story in a few brief words. He had been engaged to Miss Crofton, whom, no doubt, Seton remembered, and she was dead. He had come away for rest and change.

Arthur had no cause to complain of Captain Seton's want of feeling or sympathy. He came hastily to find him; was full of compunction for not having guessed at anything amiss; would come with him anywhere, stay with him, or join him after he had taken the Raymonds to England. Anyway, he would not leave him alone. Arthur, how-

ever, though not ungrateful, decided in favour of solitude for the present ; and, with a half-proposal for meeting again in Italy after a few weeks, they parted ; and Arthur drifted somewhat aimlessly about from one place to another, trying to make an object of sight-seeing, but feeling lost and lonely. He was fond of travelling, and even then got some amusement out of its little incidents, finding in it something to do, but very little to think about ; climbing mountains and making long expeditions one day, and doing nothing whatever the next ; trying to write cheerful letters home, yet shrinking from the answers to them ; making acquaintances when they came in his way, and doing much as other travellers, but quite unable to rouse himself to any sort of plan for the future, and neither knowing nor caring where the next week would find him. There was no one for whose companionship he exactly wished, or who could now have been quite the friend

he wanted ; but, though the solitude and absence of association were productive of present ease, they offered nothing to fill the dead blank, nothing to wake 'the low beginnings of content.' The days slipped by somehow, but it was hardly possible to imagine a greater contrast than between them and the days that had been lightened by the hope of such a bright and definite future.

By way of occupation he did a good deal of travelling on foot ; and, in the course of his wandering, found himself one evening walking into Caletto and thinking it one of the prettiest places he had ever seen. The lake was shining in the sunset ; the tawny colours of the old palace were deepened by the glow ; the rich southern foliage clothed the sides of the water, and showed glimpses of picturesque houses in between. There were statues and urns here and there in the palace garden ; while its marble balustrade, with steps at

either end, gave it something the air of a picture on a fan. There were one or two tables on this terrace, and at one of them stood a girl in white, with a big, flat, straw hat, piling great bunches of white and purple grapes on to a dish before her. Another figure, dressed in some pleasant sort of buff colour, was sitting on the balustrade reading. It was a pretty scene, yet it gave Arthur a pang; for, granting beauty for quaintness, romance for homely simplicity, it was a sort of glorified parody of the little tea-garden at 'The Pot of Lilies,' with its wall overhanging the river, its urn of geraniums, its statue holding a lamp, its vine-tressed arbour, and its table with the mustard-pot and the ginger-beer. He turned quickly away, but found himself face to face with a stout, dark-eyed lady who was toiling up the ascent towards the terrace. She scanned Arthur curiously; and he, mustering his best Italian, asked the

name of the village and if he could get a night's lodging there.

She gave him a hearty, gracious smile that showed all her white teeth, and replied by such voluble information that Arthur, quite at fault, begged her pardon and repeated his question.

'I am English,' he said; 'I speak very little Italian.'

'Ah, English, yes,' she answered in that language. 'I speak it—but not well. But here are two ladies who will comprehend perfectly. Will you accompany me, signor?'

Much surprised at the invitation Arthur followed her up the steps of the terrace.

'Rosa carina,' she said, 'here is an English gentleman who has lost his way. Explain to him the situation.'

'I have not lost my way, signorina,' said Arthur, catching the words, as the lady in buff rose and bowed to him. 'I took the liberty of asking if a lodging could be got in this lovely place.'

‘Oh, yes, I think so,’ replied Rosa. ‘Do you see the house with a balcony by the water? That is an inn, and there is almost sure to be a room there if you are not very particular.’

‘Thank you very much. I am quite used to traveller’s fare,’ returned Arthur, surprised at the English accent and manner. ‘And this place is called ——?’

‘Caletto. English tourists don’t often find it out.’

‘So we should make them welcome. Pray, signor, sit down, and take some wine; you have been walking—you are tired. Ah, you understand?’

‘Yes, many thanks. But I am so hot and dusty—I am ashamed ——,’ said Arthur, fancying he saw a look of slight disapproval in the younger lady’s face.

‘Ah, we can excuse you. We are artists, signor; all comers are welcome. I have been in your country and sung on your

boards, and so will Mademoiselle Mattei one of these days, I hope.'

This was in English, and then in a half-aside to Rosa in Italian: 'Why not, Rosina? He is a handsome youth—and society is agreeable.'

Handsome young Englishmen were not quite the society Rosa desired at that moment. However, she could not be uncivil, and Arthur really looked both hot and tired; so she said politely:

'Pray sit down and rest—it has been a hot day.'

'Thank you, since you are so kind,' said Arthur, seating himself, and thinking, as they drew near the table and Violante silently pushed the bottle of wine towards him: 'How Jem would rave at such an encounter!'

'This is a beautiful place,' he said. 'I wonder that it is so little known to English people generally.'

‘Perhaps we like to keep some places a little to ourselves,’ said Rosa, smiling.

‘But, excuse me, are you not English?’

‘Not exactly. I was brought up in England. I did not mean to be uncivil to English tourists, but you know they do rather spoil a place for the natives.’

‘Tourists always do,’ said Arthur. ‘I don’t know, though, what else I can call myself.’

‘I suppose tourists are people who travel for pleasure, and not because they are obliged.’

‘Well, I am not obliged to travel, certainly.’

‘Then you are a tourist,’ said Rosa, brightly. ‘But then you come alone, and an English stranger is rare enough in Caletto to be very welcome. Is it not so, madame?’ repeating her words in Italian.

‘Oh, as welcome as shade in summer. I have lived in your smoke, sir, and I do not wonder you all escape from it.’

‘I am not prepared to admit that we never see the sun,’ said Arthur, who all this time was wondering much who his entertainers might be. Rosa, with the address and appearance of a well-bred English lady, completely puzzled him, more especially as he supposed her to be the Mademoiselle Mattei to whom Madame Cellini had referred, and whom he never dreamed of identifying with the silent, childish-looking girl beside him. They were very amusing, out-of-the-way sort of people, and the scene was wonderfully lovely and picturesque; but he was tired, and admiration was an effort; so he soon rose, and with very courteous thanks prepared to leave them. Madame Cellini accompanied him to the steps to point out the way, and said when she returned: ‘Ah, I have practised my English. I told him my name. Doubtless he will have heard it, and his—is—ah—Spinchere—Pinchere.’

‘Pincher!’ said Rosa, with an involun-

tary accent of disappointment: 'That is an English name, certainly.'

'It is not pretty,' said Violante, thinking in her own mind that Spencer Crichton far exceeded it.

So no identity of name came to rouse a suspicion of any connection between their new acquaintance and their old one. There was scarcely any family likeness between Hugh's pale, regular face, grave and rather massive, and Arthur's bright, tanned skin, and pleasant though unremarkable features. Besides, Rosa and Violante did not know Hugh's face without a look of interest and purpose, nor his light, deep-set eyes without the ardour of an eager hope; while, when they saw Arthur, his dark-lashed eyes were absent and languid, and his mouth, though he smiled often, set into sad lines when he fell silent.

But one young English gentleman was sufficiently like another in foreign eyes, and

the association of ideas was close enough to make Rosa anxious as to the effect of this encounter on her sister.

‘Madame Cellini is so fond of company she cannot pass anyone by,’ she said, rather petulantly, when the two girls were alone.

‘She is very fond of talking,’ replied Violante, ‘but I like her now that I am not forced to sing to her. And it would not have been kind not to ask Signor—what did you call him?—Pincher, to rest, when he looked so hot and tired.’

‘All Englishmen like to tire themselves out,’ said Rosa.

‘You told him we were not English, Rosa ; that was not true.’

‘My dear child, I could not tell him our family history—what did it matter? I dare-say he thought us very odd ; but I am not tired of solitude, even if Madame Cellini is.’

‘Oh, no, nor I. I should like to stay here always.’

‘Some time we must, I suppose, go back to Civita Bella.’

‘Yes!’ with a long sigh. ‘Rosa mia, I will be good and useful if I can. Perhaps father is dull without us.’

‘His engagement is almost over. Violante, how should you like to go to England?’

‘To England?’ echoed Violante, with a startled blush. ‘I shall never go there—*now*. Now I cannot sing,’ she added.

‘I think Uncle and Aunt Grey will perhaps ask us—you and me, I mean, to stay for a time and see what we could do.’

‘But what would become of father?’

‘I think he would like to travel about for a little. Perhaps he would come to England too.’

‘And should you teach our cousins as you used to do?’ said Violante.

‘No, the girls are all grown up, and so are the boys. But I might find other children to teach—or—or—In short, Violante,

I cannot tell exactly; but you know Uncle Grey has always wished to see you, and now that you are free to leave home I should not wonder if he asked us.'

Violante sat musing.

'I will go, then,' she said, after a pause.

Rosa could hardly help laughing at the unconscious decision of the tone, which, though Violante had merely meant acquiescence, showed that the idea was not distasteful to her.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SIGNOR ARTHUR.

‘The sound of a voice that was still.’

MADAME CELLINI was not likely to be shy of making a new acquaintance, nor were her young companions accustomed to the profound seclusion in which Italian girls are usually trained. Rosa would have accepted an intimacy with a compatriot readily enough, and even Violante was used to a certain amount of intercourse with her father's friends. Here at Caletto Madame Cellini had a few intimates, and when Arthur Spencer lingered on there she discovered that French formed a possible medium of communication,

and took a great fancy to the pleasant-mannered young Englishman.

‘Folly, Rosina!’ she said, as Rosa ventured a remonstrance. ‘I read your fears. You think the Signor Inglese at the Consulate looked too often above his music at our Violantina. Never fear! So will many another. And as for Signor Pinchere, talk to him yourself, Rosina!’

And the old lady gave an indescribably-mischievous smile, and then laughed broadly. Rosa was angry, but she did not choose to enlighten Madame Cellini any further as to the real state of the case; and, unable to prevent the intercourse by Italian restrictions, nor to justify it by the more English manner of ignoring the possibility of a chance acquaintance signifying to anyone, she was obliged to leave it in the neutral ground of ‘being Madame Cellini’s way.’

She need not have alarmed herself. Arthur knew that it was all very amusing,

and accepted it as an incident in his travels; but would not have cared if anything had turned his steps in another direction. Nothing, however, did turn them; so he tried to distract his thoughts by Madame Cellini's wonderful stories, and to interest himself in her confidences about the young *cantatrice* whose career had been so suddenly checked. He had given the nearest town as an address where letters might find him, and having written to Hugh before his arrival he expected an answer. Somehow, Arthur's thoughts turned to Hugh with a sort of fellow-feeling. He, too, was suffering; and perhaps would not only pity him, but would understand how no change of scene did him any good. If Hugh had but known! but he only thought that Arthur was well spared the sight of him.

Arthur, however, congratulated himself on having obtained some materials for a letter to Jem, a little less like a guide-book

than his ordinary correspondence, describing old Madame Cellini, and telling the wrong end of Violante's history. 'She was to have made a great sensation, and married the manager, and the poor child lost her lover and her voice at once. So she looks sad and pathetic; and isn't it a miserable little story for the sunny south? You write too anxiously about me. I am very well, and make a fair fight for it. If that poor little girl can hold up her head after such a storm, one ought to have better courage.'

Violante was as unconscious of the garbled form in which her story had reached the English stranger's ears, and of the reflections which he drew therefrom for his own benefit, as she was of the connection of Signor Arthur—or Arturo, as he had taught Madame Cellini to call him, finding her conceptions of his surname beyond correction—with the chief actor in it. But she felt drawn towards him, and ceased to be shy of

one so kindly in manner, while a sort of instinct of fellow-feeling made her say, after a few days, to Rosa: 'She was sure Signor Arthur was unhappy, and she wondered why.'

'I think he seems very cheerful,' said Rosa, rather dryly.

'Still, I am sure,' persisted Violante; but news came to them at this time which put Signor Arthur entirely into the background. Rosa received a letter from her uncle, Mr. Grey, which suggested a complete change in all the conditions of their existence. It bore date from his house in Kensington, and ran as follows:

'My dear Rosa,

'Your aunt and I have been very sorry to hear of Violante's illness and of the change it has made in her future prospects. Under the circumstances we have always felt that it was best that she should pursue the career that your father marked out for her,

and have never entertained any prejudice against it. But as she has lost the exceptional power that made it expedient, and is still, I believe, under eighteen, it seems desirable that she should turn her mind in another direction. I do not know what openings your father could find for her in Italy ; but as you write that things are somewhat at a stand-still with all of you, I wish very much that you and she should come and pay us a long visit, after which you might form such plans as seem desirable. If you were likely to remain in London I think I know where you could find pupils, and as for Violante, as she is so young, it is possible that she might make up her mind to finish her education at an excellent school, where her music and her Italian would be helpful, and where your aunt's recommendation would be quite sufficient. However, this is for the future ; and in the meantime your cousins will be delighted to see you

both, as will also your aunt and myself.
With love to Violante,

‘I am, your affectionate uncle,

‘RICHARD GREY.’

Rosa was sitting under the verandah of the cottage where they lodged as she read this letter. Great flowering creepers and large-leaved vines shaded her from the sun; before her stretched the fair Italian landscape, and at a little distance Violante was feeding and playing with a little white kid, the pet of the household; while two little brown-skinned girls, the children of their landlady, were chattering away to her at the top of their Italian voices. Violante had scarcely ever known a child in her limited life at Civita Bella, but she had taken to these little ones from the first of her coming to Caletto, and delighted in their society. With her short, curly hair and slender shape, she looked scarcely more than a child her-

self, and resembled nothing less than a disappointed *prima donna*.

Yet, after all her history, there seemed something ridiculous in the idea of sending her to school, something utterly incongruous in the thought of that Kensington house in a London atmosphere, with the blue southern skies and the marble palaces of her native town. It was strange; but Rosa—who had practically been very happy in an ordinary English life and was by far the best fitted of the party to resume it—could not help regarding the loss of Violante's future, and of their somewhat rambling artistic career, with a half-sentimental regret. She felt, like her father, that it was a come-down, that something had been lost that could never be regained. She called to Violante and put the letter into her hand.

Violante sat down on the step, and read it carefully through in silence.

‘Well, Violante, what do you think?’ said Rosa.

‘I have been thinking—*much*,’ said Violante softly.

‘Indeed? What about?’

‘Myself,’ replied the girl. ‘Rosa, father would be happier without me now I cannot sing. When he sees me he thinks: “Ah, what she might have been!” It breaks his heart, I know it.’

‘I think father might do very well without us for a time, and then he might himself come to England,’ said Rosa.

‘And,’ said Violante, ‘I know nothing—nothing but my music, but I think now—now that is over, I could learn.’

‘But you would not like to go to school, Violante?’

‘It does not seem possible to have what we like,’ said Violante; ‘but it would not be like acting.’

‘No, indeed!’

‘And I must work somehow. And, oh, Rosa mia! how my heart would ache if

father every day looked at me and grieved, and we had no money.'

'Yes, my darling, that would be hard for you. But, oh, Violante! to think that all we hoped for you should end like this!'

'I am very sorry,' said Violante, meekly; 'but I think our uncle will be kind, and—we cannot help it; let us go.'

So it was Violante who spoke the common-sense consenting words and recognised the new necessity. But, indeed, since all her faculties had not been absorbed in the effort to perform an impossibility, a new self-reliance seemed to have come upon her and her unreasoning terror had disappeared. Soft and clinging she must always be, as she laid her head on Rosa's knee and whispered: 'We shall *both* go, Rosa mia! we shall be together.' But the strange land seemed to have no terror for her. Either she feared her father and Civita Bella more, or some strange unrecognised attraction hung over

her lover's country. Did Hope, with her wings cut, still flutter feebly at the bottom of her heart; or was it merely that a glamour still hung over English life and English people that made the novelty attractive instead of dreadful? Did she think an English school-girl less removed from Hugh Crichton than an Italian *cantatrice*? She *thought* nothing of all this, but she recognised, without an effort, that it was right to accept her uncle's invitation. Those secret unknown currents, below our wishes, below our sense of duty, below our resolutions, can float the ship against the wind, or hold it back, spite of a fair breeze and all sails unfurled.

‘If an English winter should be too cold for you?’ said Rosa.

‘Oh, I am so much better. I don't think it will hurt me. You know I never feel strong in the heat.’

‘Well,’ said Rosa, ‘I shall like to see the girls again very much.’

‘You used to talk of Beatrice and Lucy.’

‘Yes, Lucy is married, you know. Then there are Mary and Kitty, my pupils, a little older than you ; and Charlie divides the two pairs of girls. Ned is the youngest. Yes—I shall like to see them all. How strange to be in England again !’

Rosa sat silent and thoughtful. After all, it was not four years since that English life of hers had ended abruptly with her mother's death ; and four years is not a very long time in which to lose vivid impressions. She had grown up almost ignorant of her parents and little sister ; and when she was a bright, handsome girl of twenty, full of ardour and enthusiasm, she made, in the course of a set of private theatricals, the discovery that she had a taste and talent for acting of no ordinary kind. She did not love teaching, and reversed Violante's subse-

quent history by trying with all her might and main to gain her uncle's consent to earn her living on the stage. She was in the full tide of an enthusiasm which was only increased by opposition, and which no one expected in the good sedate girl who was her aunt's right hand, when—a new acquaintance, a few weeks' intercourse, a few opposing hints, and Rosa's persistency drooped and faded, and her hot Italian nature took another turn.

He could not marry an actress. Poor Rosa! either circumstances were irresistible or she was deceived altogether; but she sacrificed ambition to love, for it was a sacrifice, and the love failed her too. She never knew what separated them; but it was well for her that the summons home took her right away from both disappointments, and gave her an object in life in *Violante*.

She was a brave, strong girl, and she had won the battle. How she had mis-

trusted and hated Hugh Crichton none could say! How she had dreaded her own fate for Violante! Now, when she thought of returning to England, that first ambition returned in a more moderate form to her mind. She felt fairly certain of her own powers, and the attraction of the life was undiminished; but she felt that it would be almost impossible to fix herself permanently in England, and that, now that Violante was useless, she would probably be obliged to take a larger share in earning the family living. She had expected that Violante would regard the idea of a visit to England with horror, and was relieved, though surprised, to find how easily she resigned herself to it.

Violante had a very clear picture in her mind of what it would be to go back to Civita Bella, idle and useless; freed, indeed, from the burden of her profession, but exposed to her father's regrets and re-

proaches. Life had been very hard before, it would be very dreary and objectless now. The ghosts of happy and unhappy hours would alike haunt the familiar places; and England, over the thought of which a soft sweet halo rested, seemed like a refuge.

Mr. Grey's letter had been received on a Saturday, and on the Sunday morning Violante was sitting by herself on the terrace, doing what she called, with a reminiscence of her mother's early training, 'reading her chapter,' this being one of the few religious observances which had survived their unsettled life. Violante had a sort of half-superstitious reverence for the English Bible, her English mother's gift. She always said her prayers in English, and dutifully read a chapter on Sunday. She was not very particular which; but since she had known Hugh Crichton she had indulged in some self-congratulation that her religion as well as her blood was English. Rosa had be-

stowed a small amount of technical instruction on her, but it fitted on to nothing ; and as the elder sister had never thought it her duty to make Violante unhappy about the Sunday operas, which she could not have possibly avoided, and as Signor Mattei was nearly equally indifferent to his own religion and to theirs, Violante's faith was chiefly negative. On this Sunday morning she sat, with her Bible in her hand, looking at the groups of peasants who were making their way to the little church, and listening to the bell tinkling softly through the murmur of the trees, and the sharper sound of the gay Italian voices. By-and-by they would dance under the trees. Violante began to wonder what Sunday would be like in England. She was surprised at herself for not having asked Rosa more questions about it ; but her mind had been absorbed in its difficult present, and she had been first too

passive for curiosity, and then too deeply-interested to express it.

As she mused Arthur Spencer came up the steps towards her, with that air of neatness and respectability that generally distinguishes an English traveller on Sunday. Violante perceived for the first time that he was in mourning, and was sufficiently interested to wonder why.

‘Good morning, signorina,’ he said.

‘Good morning,’ she answered. ‘Isn’t it a beautiful day?’

‘Yes, very lovely, it will be getting cold at home, though.’

‘I am going to England soon,’ said Violante, with a sort of shy confidence, as she bethought her that here was a chance of satisfying her curiosity.

‘Are you?’ he said, rather surprised. ‘How is that?’

‘We have an English uncle in London, and he has asked us to go and see him.’

Mamma was English,' said Violante, with a little unconscious pleasure.

'Ah, yes; so Madame Cellini told me. Do you think you shall like it?'

'Yes,' said Violante, 'but I don't know much about England. I wish you would tell me. I should like to seem like an English girl to my cousins.'

Arthur smiled.

'I don't know where to begin,' he said, kindly. 'Does your uncle live in London?'

'Yes; he is a solicitor,' she said, repeating the well-known word with a little pride in its correctness. 'But perhaps I am to go to school.'

'To school? You!' exclaimed Arthur, thinking of the opera and the manager-lover. 'Should you like that?'

'I know nothing but music,' said Violante, blushing; 'I never had any time. But I should like to learn. What is school like?'

Violante did not know why her companion turned away his head and made no answer for a moment.

‘I can’t tell you much about girls’ schools,’ he said presently. ‘I know one that must be rather a jolly place. I suppose the girls learn lessons, and go to walk, and have masters. I should think you would find it dull.’

‘I should think it was peaceful,’ said Violante, using a stronger word than she meant.

‘Do you think so much of peace?’ he said, rather sadly.

‘It is because I have been so tired,’ she answered simply, and he thought: ‘Poor little girl! she is fretting after the manager. But to send a *prima donna* to school; how ridiculous! Well, I won’t discourage her.’ ‘I know some school-mistresses who are very kind and lively. My sister goes there. She is very happy,’ he added aloud, but thinking

to himself that even the liberal Miss Vennings would hardly admit a disappointed opera-singer to their school.

‘And on Sunday, what do they do in England on Sunday? Oh, yes,’ noticing that he glanced at her Bible. ‘Yes, we are Protestants, like mamma; but I did not often go to the service at the Consulate, because, of course, Sunday was an opera night. What do English girls do on Sunday?’

Arthur's involuntary laugh at her *naïve* statement died away as her question recalled the very sweetest, brightest picture of his English Mysie, in her white Sunday dress, walking down the churchyard path.

For long weeks he had never spoken of her, never seen anyone who had ever heard her name. He felt a strange impulse to speak of her now, to *hear* of her, though it could only be from his own lips. It was easier to do so in the simple language neces-

sary to make Violante understand so unfamiliar a picture, and to an auditor who would, he thought, only receive the impression that he chose to give.

‘I knew an English girl,’ he said; and, leaning on the wall, with his face turned away, he tried to describe Mysie’s Sunday—how she ‘taught the little peasants,’ ‘went to church,’ ‘sang hymns,’ ‘walked about among the flowers,’ it had all been very commonplace once, but as Arthur told it now it sounded to him like the Lives of the Saints.

‘And she is dead?’ said Violante, softly.

‘How can you tell?’ he exclaimed, astonished.

‘Ah, signor, it was in the sound of your voice,’ she answered, with an interest that would have been how greatly intensified had she known to whom she was speaking.

‘Yes, you are right,’ said Arthur, and something in his voice, repressed and almost

stern, made Violante start and flush and quiver, for he spoke with the very tone of 'Signor Hugo.'

Neither for a moment noticed the other, and then Arthur, perceiving that she was agitated, and not wishing to say more about himself, said kindly :

'I hope you will be a very happy "English girl," signorina.'

'Oh,' exclaimed Violante, 'there is too *much* in the world for happiness.'

'Or—too little! But see, there's your sister; she is looking for you.'

Violante started up, and, perhaps a little conscious of how much she had implied, ran down the steps towards Rosa.

'What a brute that manager must be!' thought Arthur. 'But that creature in a school would be like a hare in a rabbit-hutch. Even Flossy couldn't tackle such an incongruity. What a queer incident it is!' and a sort of half-impatient feeling

crossed Arthur's mind because he could not be excited and amused by it. He was so young and bright-natured that he got tired of grief, and yet his grief held him fast.

‘I wish there was an Italian war up, and I could get myself shot!’ he thought, and then his mind glanced wearily over the consolations often thought out so hardly, and that sometimes, and slowly, were having their effect. He tried to be resigned, and he longed, poor boy! not only for his lost Mysie, but for his lost light-heartedness. He strolled back to the inn at last, with a deep sigh; and found himself wondering what new queer sort of Italian dishes his black-eyed talkative hostess would produce for dinner.

CHAPTER XXV.

NO GOOD AT ALL.

'There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.'

THAT same Sunday afternoon Signor Mattei walked slowly into Caletto, and seeking the lodging where he knew that his daughters were staying sat down under the verandah, with the feelings of a man who has come to a period in his life from which he sees no particular means of progress. Rosa and Violante were out, and he rested after the hot walk he had taken from the point where the nearest public conveyance stopped, and thought over the events of the last few weeks.

Things had gone wrong—his highest hopes were destroyed, and his more moderate comforts and expectations had shared in their fall. He was angry with Violante, and as he sat waiting for her blamed her in his heart for their misfortunes, in a way that would have been intensely cruel and selfish had he cared what became of himself. But he did not cherish an unforgiving resentment against her because she could no longer make their fortune and her own, but because she had lost the career that he so honoured. He would not have forgiven her could she have brought him riches gained in another way ; but, though she had disappointed the man's high ideal and not his self-interest, the disappointment recoiled just as hardly on her.

Signor Vasari had insulted and dismissed him, 'esteeming his own private grudge better than his orchestra, where he cannot supply my place,' thought Signor Mattei, with a con-

tempt that almost neutralized his mortification. 'Who can play the violin solos as I can?' he thought proudly. 'But old Naldi at Florence understands real genius—could I go and leave the girls alone? Rosa has unparalleled discretion and Violante will have no lovers now. Eccola! She is coming.'

Violante came round the corner of the house and started with a surprise not altogether delightful. However, reminding herself that she could be in no disgrace now, she ran up to him and kissed him.

'Ah, padre mio! How hot and tired you look. You have come to see us? Rosa will be here directly; she is with Madame Cellini. I will get you some melon; that will be cool and nice.'

Her livelier manner, her more blooming looks, were evident at a glance, as she ran into the house and brought out a slice of melon and then a glass of light wine.

'Is it good?' she said, with smiling

earnestness. 'I will take your hat and stick.'

'You look well—have you tried your voice?' he said abruptly.

'No, father;' answered Violante, with a sudden droop into her old timid self and falling into silence.

'It must surely be returning—in a few weeks.'

'Father, there is Rosa,' interrupted Violante hastily, as her sister and Madame Cellini came up the path.

Signor Mattei assumed a less anxious air; he was sufficiently in awe of Rosa not to wish her to find him reverting to the forbidden subject; and he came in and drank chocolate, which was now provided, and allowed himself to be made comfortable after his journey. Violante fell into the background, leaving Rosa to make the communication of their uncle's letter. Madame Cellini, willing to give them an opportunity for their discussion, strolled away to look at

the sunset, and Rosa handed the letter to her father, leaving it to tell its own story. The little tawny children peeped at Violante from a distance, and showed her the kid with vine-leaves round its horns; but she shook her head at them, and sat down demurely in the window, with a sort of good-child air herself, to listen to her father's decision.

Signor Mattei had never shown any jealousy of his daughter's English relations. He loved his wife's memory; and, though his brother-in-law's mode of life would have been totally uncongenial to him and it was well that they never met, he rather liked to talk of 'the uncle—of the highest respectability—who could command the London musical world,' a power which would much have astonished Mr. Grey himself; and the fact that Rosa, coming from this uncle, had been prepared to like her home life had greatly tended to obviate any uncomfortable feelings. Besides, to put it plainly, he wanted

just now to get rid of his daughters, and their uncle's proposal was exceedingly convenient to him.

'It has come,' he said, rather sentimentally, 'to help our fallen fortunes. Now, with you in the lap of luxury, I can bend to the storm and suffer hardships willingly.'

Violante looked distressed, but Rosa answered :

'We do not wish to be idle wherever we are, and should always come to you when you wanted us. But as my pupils seem to be dispersed, and they have behaved so ill to you at the opera, some change seems desirable.'

'Assuredly, Rosina,—assuredly. Make yourself easy ; anything will do for me.'

'But, father, what *shall* you do ?' said Rosa—not very uneasily, for she knew from her father's manner that he had schemes in view.

‘I?—I shall take my staff in my hand and make my way to Florence. Old Naldi, my friend there, is a true musician.’

‘And you will get an engagement at the opera there?’ said Rosa.

‘Yes, yes, it may be so; and next spring, perhaps, an opening in London: I am not unknown there.’

‘That would suit exactly,’ said Rosa.

‘If by that time I had found employment in London, and Violante—Violante! ah, she is no good at all,’ said Signor Mattei, mournfully—‘*she* can do nothing.’

‘I will go to school and learn,’ said Violante, her voice choking.

‘Ah, foolish child! there is but one moment in life when success is possible: pass that—pass all! You threw your chance away—it is over.’

The words fell on Violante’s ears with a double sense: she hid her face in her hands, and ran out of the room, down through the

olive trees, towards the lake. ‘Over for ever!’—and she but seventeen. Was she never to have another chance,—another love?

‘Ah, never! never!’ she cried, half aloud, as the sleeping passion, lulled by the passiveness of her recovery and by her easy life, woke suddenly in all its force. ‘I had better die, for it is all over for me! Ah, Hugo,—Hugo mio! ah!’

The last cry dropped into startled commonplace as the branch of a tree caught her long muslin dress, and tore it right across, while she almost lost her footing with the shock.

‘Ah, signorina, take care; you’ll hurt yourself,’ said an unexpected voice; and ‘Signor Arthur’ caught her by the hand and began to disentangle the unlucky dress.

‘Dear me, I’m afraid it’s a good deal damaged,’ he said, good-naturedly; ‘you should not run so fast.’

‘I was—unhappy: so I did not see,’ said Violante, simply.

The unhappiness was obvious, for Violante’s eyes were wet and her voice trembling. Yet Arthur could hardly help smiling at the utterly un-English confession. He thought she could only so have acknowledged some very childish sorrow.

‘What makes you so unhappy?’ he said, with equal directness.

‘Because,’ she answered, telling half a truth, ‘because my father is here, and I have lost my voice, signor; and he says I shall never have another chance in my life. All is gone in that one.’

Mistaken as Arthur was as to the facts of her story, he had heard enough to supplement her words; and the kindly impulse of consolation prompted him to say:

‘Oh, no, you must not think that. There must be a great deal left in your life yet, and

in England you can begin fresh. Perhaps your voice will get strong again there.'

'Ah, *that* may be,' said Violante, without any answering smile.

'Anyway, one must do the best one can and not vex other people,' he said, with a glance at a letter he held in his hand. Violante's eyes followed his, but she only saw the bit of folded paper, little knowing that the mere sight of the writer's name would have burst into her depression like a storm into mountain mist, and would have brought the past and the present together again; while Arthur went on, ignorant of how much vivid, unreasonable happiness he could with a few words have given to the creature he was trying so kindly to console. For even to hear of all Hugh's recent troubles would have been better than not to hear of him at all; and the few reserved, incommunicative lines which had just disappointed Arthur would have seemed like a message from Paradise.

‘All sorts of pleasant things may come to you in England ; so keep up a good heart, signorina.’

‘Keep up a good heart,’ repeated Violante, as if the expression was not quite familiar to her.

‘Yes ; don’t be frightened, you know, and never say die.’

Violante smiled now. The bright voice and look did put some heart into her ; and Arthur, who had merely talked in the most cheering way he could think of, without considering, as Hugh would have done in like case, whether he had himself proved the truth of his words, felt all the brighter for his success.

‘These are very unpeaceful olive-branches to have torn your dress so badly,’ he said, after a pause, to turn her attention.

‘Ah, yes ; but I think I should like to keep a bit of them to remind me of keeping a good heart, and of never saying die,’ said

Violante, and the words sounded inexpressibly droll in her soft, lingering foreign accent. Arthur broke off a little piece and gave it to her.

‘I might do the same,’ he said. ‘I’m sure I need the motto.’

And so unconscious and so uncoquettish was Violante’s way that Arthur actually dropped the olive-leaves into his pocket-book without thinking of smiling at her proposal. ‘There,’ he said, ‘we will remember.’

‘I will try,’ said Violante; ‘and there is Rosa. She will say it is late. Good night, Signor Arthur!’

‘Good night!’

Violante repeated the advice, and showed her olive-leaves to her sister; but, though Rosa held her tongue by a great effort of discretion, Signor Arthur, on thinking over the transaction, was not very much surprised to find that he obtained no more private interviews with Violante. Perhaps Rosa was

somewhat astonished that he did not seek any.

She had, however, much to occupy her in the arrangements for their journey. Signor Mattei, who was very far from selfish in practical matters, was quite ready to assign a sufficient portion of the money recently earned by Violante and himself to take his daughters respectably to England; and the whole party soon returned to Civita Bella to make preparations. Their small stock of furniture was to be sold, the ready-money being much more valuable to them. Violante tried to induce Rosa to pack up the china bowl among their private possessions, but Rosa refused steadily and a little harshly. She did not mean the old life to cling round her sister still.

‘Give it to Maddalena,’ she said. ‘We will not sell it, since you care so much.’

So Violante went to the old woman, whose grief at parting was, perhaps, really the

most pathetic part of this break-up of home, and bid her keep the bowl 'for her sake.'

'Ecco, carissima,' said Maddalena, 'I have had a dream, and the dream-book tells me that it means a meeting and a joy, and thou shalt meet thy true-love, or another better, and then shall I give thee back the china bowl.'

Violante was not without some lingering belief herself in the dreams and visions which Maddalena had impressed on her all her life. So it helped her a little way on her new start in life when, the last night she slept on Italian soil, she dreamt that she gave Hugh an olive-branch and that he put it into the china bowl.

She needed every little help when she sobbed and wept at parting with her father, and begged him to forgive her all she had not done.

'Ah, child, you were no good,' he said.

‘But do not cry; be happy, since you will not be great.’

Signor Mattei turned away, when he was left to his solitude, with a certain sense of freedom. He laid his plans for going to Florence, and thought of the dream of his youth—an opera that he had never written, but which now, perhaps, might find its way from his brain to his fingers. But he could not lay his hand on the particular piece of music that he wanted, all the store of violin-strings were mislaid, his salad was made with bad oil, and he was so much at a loss for some one to find fault with that he rushed off to find old Maddalena in her new situation and accuse her of packing up his fiddle-strings in his daughters' box. And Maddalena, having a sore heart of her own, reproached him so unreasonably with having driven her dear young ladies out of the country that she quite restored his self-complacency; and, having refreshed her spirits by this outbreak, she

went back and found the violin-strings, and hinted that when il signor was settled at Florence he had better send for her to come and keep house for him.

CHAPTER XXVI.

NEW KENSINGTON.

'The days have vanished, tone and tint,
And yet, perhaps, the hoarding sense
Gives out at times (he knows not whence)
A little flash, a mystic hint.'

MR. GREY lived in a good-sized house in one of the newest squares in South Kensington. He had prospered in the world since his sister's marriage, and having himself married a lady with money, was, spite of his large family, comfortably off, and belonged to that large class of Londoners who, by clever contrivances and well-managed economies, mix very happily in a society which is created

and upheld by people much richer than themselves. The girls went to balls in cabs, but they appeared at them very well dressed and very agreeable. They did a great many things for themselves which many of their friends depended for on their maids; but though they did not give many parties in the season their entertainments were always pleasant ones. They were acquainted with a sprinkling of artists, authors, and actors, and were themselves alive to a good many different interests. They were also very kind, and were ready heartily to welcome their Italian cousins, not wishing in the least to sink Signor Mattei's occupation; but rather, in a warm-hearted and perfectly genuine way, willing to make capital of what they knew of Violante's sad little story, and to think that a young *cantatrice* whose prospects had been so suddenly overclouded was a very interesting kind of cousin. Moreover, Rosa was an old

friend, and had always made herself loved and respected.

In some households the father, and in some the mother, is the leading spirit ; but at the Greys' the most prominent people were certainly the girls. Not that they usurped any place or power that did not naturally belong to them ; but somehow there were so many of them, they were so available for any kind of entertainment, so good-natured, and so popular, that they were apt to be the first object in making the acquaintance of the family. There had been for a short time four Miss Greys in the world at once—the eldest being about the age of Rosa Mattei, the youngest some seven years younger. They were very much alike, with pretty features, fair skins, and abundant hair. All were good-looking ; not one was a beauty. All could sing nicely, dance well, read books intelligently, act pleasantly at private theatricals ; but not one of them had any prominent

or conspicuous talent. Never were girls so clever with their fingers, so skilful in little matters of dress and contrivance, so obliging and cheerful, so free from jealousies, and so united among themselves. One never grudged another her partners, or her lovers, nor detracted in any way from another's charms. They exchanged confidences freely on the state of their affections and their prospects, which they felt bound to further whenever they could. Rosa, not being quite prepared for this free and easy confidence, had carefully hidden her experiences from her cousins' eyes, and had by so doing possibly lost a chance of a happy ending to them.

Since her time Lucy, the second, had married, and Beatrice, the eldest, had been engaged, and again disengaged—a circumstance which she had borne with an amount of common-sense and courage more easy to despise than to imitate, having returned to the interests of young ladyhood with appa-

rently undiminished fervour and invincible good-nature. Mary, the third, was slightly the cleverer of the four, and had aspirations in less obvious directions ; consequently, she fulfilled the claims of her actual state in life a little less perfectly ; while Kitty, the youngest, was the softest, prettiest, and most attractive of them all, and had the greatest claim to stand alone as a beauty. The eldest son, Charlie, was at Oxford, and the youngest, Ned, in the Navy. Such were the relations who were now preparing to welcome Rosa and Violante among them.

It was early in November ; many a tint of gold and russet was still brightening the woods round Oxley, but in the squares of Kensington scarcely a leaf was lingering ; fogs began to prevail, and the streets looked more cheerful after the gas was lit than during the hours of dim and struggling daylight. Nothing outside could make the Greys' drawing-room otherwise than bright and

cheerful. With its pink curtains, its bright fire, its variety of little tables and chairs, all in the most convenient situations, and its pleasant, cheerful, young ladyhood, it was a very popular place, and the Greys rarely drank their afternoon tea in solitude.

On the present occasion, however, their only visitor was their sister Lucy. Mrs. Compton and they were anxiously discussing the expected cousins.

‘You see, Lucy,’ said Beatrice, ‘we are not going to make any mysteries. We have told everyone how Violante was making quite a success in Italy when she lost her voice, and she’ll be quite a little lion for us.’

‘Oh, yes, quite a catch,’ said Mrs. Compton. ‘And she would get endless pupils.’

‘Yes; but you see Rosa writes that she is so very shy and childish she does not think it would be possible for her to go about teaching.’

‘And so,’ said Mrs. Grey, ‘I have been

writing about her to Miss Venning. I thought it well to be prepared before they came.'

'Dear me, mamma! You don't think of sending her to school. Why, she would set the whole place by the ears.'

'I think she would break her heart,' said Mary.

'Rosa speaks of her as such a child.'

'Oh, don't you believe it, mother. A girl can't have been on the Italian stage, and brought up for it, and remain a child.'

'Well, Miss Venning says: "Your proposal is somewhat startling, but I have great confidence in your judgment; and if you feel that your niece would be suitable in herself, I will accept her antecedents, as Florence is wild to have her, and, of course, her music and Italian will be very useful.'

'Well, I wish them joy of her, and she of them, though nothing could be nicer than dear old Rosa.'

'Yes,' said Miss Grey; 'but do you

remember her passion for going on the stage? She used to walk up and down my room and spout poetry till her eyes would flash! I can quite imagine that the little one might make an actress. But I daresay reality has destroyed that vision.'

'I hope so,' said Mrs. Grey, 'for I have heard of a very nice engagement for her after Christmas. Mrs. Bosanquet's little girls, you know, Lucy. Nothing would be better.'

'Well,' said Mrs. Compton, 'I always had an idea about Rosa. Do you remember that civil engineer—years ago—Dick Hamilton? He danced very well—was a partner of yours, Trixie. I always thought Rosa liked him.'

'I daresay she did,' said Miss Grey, calmly. 'What became of him? He was very ugly, but had a sort of way—I remember.'

'Oh, I believe he went to India. I haven't heard of him for ages. We met him,

I recollect, at one of those delightful parties at the Stanforths. How are those dear people, by the way ?'

'Very well. Mr. Stanforth is doing some wonderful pictures. One always meets nice people there. Mary and Kitty made a new acquaintance the last time they went, and he has ripened very fast. He's in a public office and adores art and music. Kitty sings him German songs.'

'He's going to get up theatricals with the Stanforths—one of us is to help,' said Kitty.

'Oh, and you wish that "one" may be you, I suppose,' said the married sister. 'What's your friend's name, and where does he belong ?'

'Crichton—Spencer Crichton. I don't know where he comes from. I don't think his friends live in London.'

'Violante Mattei will cut you out, Kit,' said Mrs. Compton, lazily.

'I daresay,' said Kitty. 'It's all right if

she does. But we thought the Stanforths would be a good place to begin taking her to. They're so kind and jolly, and they like oddities.'

'And you expect them any time now?'

'Yes; almost at any moment. I do hope we shall all get on together.'

'Oh, no fear,' said Kitty. 'We can just let each other alone if we don't.'

These good-natured girls fully intended their cousins to have a fair share of all their little amusements and excitements, including the admiration of their acquaintances and the possibility—it seemed a very distant one for these foreign, penniless girls—of admiration growing to something more, where the ground was not preoccupied. But, at any rate, Rosa and Violante should have their share of attention and pleasure, and should do their share in making the house and drawing-room the most agreeable in Kensington.

Being so agreeable, it was not strange that James Crichton, the most sociable of civil servants, should put it on his list of pleasant houses for dropping in at ; since his own lodgings were about the last place where Jem ever thought of spending an evening ; but it was, perhaps, a curious turn of fate that brought him to the Greys on this particular occasion, with some tickets for a popular play, right into the midst of the discussion on the Italian cousins. James had so many acquaintances in all sorts of worlds, that he had always orders and tickets, magazines and new books, with which to repay the civilities of his friends ; and he was proceeding to criticise the actress whom they were going to see when Mary Grey said :

‘ We must take Violante.’

Jem’s attention was so evidently arrested by the name that Mrs. Grey said :

‘ We are expecting some Italian cousins, Mr. Crichton. My husband’s sister married

an Italian gentleman devoted to music. His daughters, Rosa and Violante Mattei, are coming to stay with us. We expect them to-night.'

Words would fail to express James's utter amazement. He said :

'Indeed—exactly so. Are they?' in tones of conventional interest. He would have been scarcely more surprised if the blue china cat on the cabinet before him had jumped off and purred in his face.

The solemn and sorrowful events that had occurred since his tour in Italy had greatly obliterated from his mind the recollection of his brother's holiday romance. It seemed to have no connection with anything that had come before or after it; and James was of opinion that they were all well out of a great difficulty in which Hugh's inconvenient intensity of feeling had nearly plunged them. His remembrance had been revived by Arthur's letter about Violante, which he had

answered with great caution, merely stating that he had seen Violante act, and that Hugh had attended her father's singing classes—the last place where Arthur would have expected to hear of him. For Jem regarded Hugh with some awe, and Hugh's feelings as a sort of tinder that might flame up on the smallest provocation. But evidently she had *not* married the manager, whom James had frequently blessed in his heart as a perfect safeguard. What would Hugh say when he knew this—would Arthur tell him? James was not in the habit of corresponding with Hugh; if he wrote him a letter on purpose it would look as if he thought the encounter of consequence. However, as the letter was consolatory as regarded Arthur's health and spirits, he satisfied his conscience by sending it on to Hugh, merely writing across it, 'Odd, isn't it? How people do turn up!' and Hugh had made no response to the communication at all!

But this turn of affairs was certainly odder still.

‘I have seen those young ladies,’ he said, after a moment’s consideration. ‘I joined my brother last May in Civita Bella, and I saw Mademoiselle Mattei make her first appearance.’

‘Indeed, did you really? Ah, poor child! Her health failed and she lost her voice. Such a destruction to her prospects! Everything seemed turning out well for her. However, we hope she may ultimately return to Italy and to her profession.’

‘Does that mean the manager?’ thought Jem, while one of the girls said :

‘Do tell us what she is like.’

‘I only saw her once off the stage,’ said Jem, in a dry way, unlike his usual effusive manner. ‘Her voice was very beautiful.’

‘Oh, but you will be quite an old friend among strangers. And your brother—but he doesn’t live in London, I think?’

‘No ; in the country,’ said Jem, for once incommunicative. ‘My people don’t often come to London, and lately we have been in trouble at home. But I shall be in your way if there is any chance of their arriving to-night. Mrs. Grey, let me wish you good evening.’

‘Well, you must look in some day and talk about Italy to my nieces.’

‘Oh, thanks—very happy—I’m sure,’ said Jem, getting away as fast as he could, in a much-disturbed frame of mind.

If the story had concerned anyone but his brother he would have liked nothing better than an encounter with a beautiful girl with this semi-sentimental tie between them—with half-allusions to the past, sympathy, confidence, mutual recollections—the shadowy lover would have made the flirtation both safe and interesting. ‘But,’ as he said to himself, ‘there was never any knowing how old Hugh would take things!’ He had not seen him

for some time, as Hugh had declined various invitations to London, and had remained entirely by himself at the Bank House. It was Mrs. Spencer Crichton's intention to spend Christmas at Bournemouth, where George and Frederica were to join her for the holidays, Hugh preferring to remain at Oxley; but directly afterwards she had determined to return to Redhurst and begin home-life again.

‘After his taking no notice of the letter,’ thought Jem, as he came into the club, ‘must I go and insist on forcing them on him? What can have brought them to England? Any idea of finding him, I wonder? I think I’ll run down and mention it casually. Wish I’d never got acquainted with those people. Hallo! why, Hugh—Hugh! What brings you here?’

‘I was obliged to come up on business, and I thought I should find you here—sooner

or later,' said Hugh, thinking his brother's excitement unnecessary.

'Of course. Delighted to see you! Do you go back to-night? You'll have some dinner? Here, waiter!'

While James gave his orders and uttered various inconsecutive remarks he furtively watched his brother, whom he had not seen since they had parted in the general break-up nearly three months before. He thought that Hugh looked aged, and, though he did not appear to be exactly ill or miserable, there was an absence of brightness or *comfortableness* about him, which Jem hardly thought accounted for by the fact that he was probably cold and hungry.

But Hugh, by word and letter, was imperturbably silent as to the history of those three solitary months, their morbid imaginings, their tortures of self-reproach, their loneliness and dulness, without the cheerful family life to which he was unconsciously accus-

tomed. Hugh began by thinking that he was too miserable to care for anything external, and ended, though he was far from admitting it, by missing the children's croquet and his mother's wool-work and all the framework of home-life. But he still felt a sort of fierce satisfaction in punishing himself, and would have been ashamed to grasp at the slightest relaxation, even if it had been without the knowledge of those whom he felt himself to have injured.

However, he allowed Jem to exercise his hospitality, which was an improvement on his old housekeeper's mutton chops; and, in fact, was sufficiently well-occupied not to notice his brother's unusual silence. At last James said:

‘So, mother's coming home after Christmas?’

‘Yes, so she says.’

‘I wonder what Arthur will do.’

‘I don't know,’ returned Hugh, gravely.

‘He writes in tolerable spirits. Odd, wasn’t it, his coming across those girls?’

‘Very odd.’

‘Things *are*—awfully odd. I’ve made a sort of acquaintance lately—some people called Grey—live at Kensington. They’re very musical and know all sorts of people.’

‘Indeed!’ said Hugh.

‘Yes, I was there to-night. Such a nice house they have! One of the pleasantest places to drop in at—no stiffness or formality. They’ve got some cousins—Italians.’ Here James began to stir the salt violently. ‘They’re expecting them to stay. Just imagine my surprise when I heard they were the two Matteis!’

Hugh set down his wine-glass, and looked entirely confounded. He did not speak a word, but fixed his eyes on his brother in silence.

‘She lost her voice, it seems,’ said James ;

‘and they asked her to come for a change with her sister.’

‘Is she still engaged to be married?’ said Hugh, hurriedly.

‘Why, that’s what I can’t make out,’ said Jem. ‘Arthur thought not, you see; but, from what her aunt told me, I think there may be some idea of it. I don’t think it’s impossible——’

‘You need not alarm yourself,’ suddenly interrupted Hugh. ‘The danger’s over. Whatever right I once thought I had to please myself in that way I have none now, and my life must have other objects.’

James was so horrified with this view of Hugh’s situation that he began vehemently to controvert it, and was ready to recommend a renewal of the acquaintance rather than the rejection of it on such a motive.

‘What would they not be justified in saying *now*?’ said Hugh—‘and if not—I’m not the same man that—that——’

Hugh paused and drooped his head low, a sudden rush of recollection revealing how much of the same man remained.

‘I’ve got to catch the Oxley train,’ he said, getting up.

‘Why, you’re never going back to-night! And I say, Hugh, you’ve been there by yourself quite long enough. Shall I run down, or why don’t you go to Bournemouth?’

‘I don’t want any change, thank you,’ said Hugh. ‘Good night,’ and he was gone before Jem had time to mutter to himself, ‘I don’t know how it would be if he saw her, though!’

But Hugh, as he went out into the cold night, felt his brain in a whirl. He had had a change, whether he wished for one or not—a change of thought, and feeling, and association; a wave of feeling that seemed to make him conscious of *what he used to be like* at that time that seemed now like his whole past. But it was past, so completely

that he did not even argue with himself against its return. His words were so far true that he could not have pushed his recent life aside, and sought out Violante again.

Only, now and then, as the days went by, she seemed to steal like a vision into his solitary rooms. He saw her finger the quaint old ornaments of his grandmother's drawing-room at the Bank House, or sit on its narrow window-seats at work. But Redhurst and all his outer life was haunted by another vision—haunted as truly as if a spirit with wet white dress and covered face had really wandered over the frosty autumn meadows, or seemed to float on the dull waters, which no summer sun awoke to sparkling light.

CHAPTER XXVII.

RELATIONS NEW AND OLD.

‘The world is full of other folks.’—THE GAYWORTHYS.

It was a wintry morning, with pale sunshine struggling through the retiring fog. In the centre of the Greys’ pretty drawing-room, among all the ottomans, tables, and nick-knacks, stood Violante. She wore a dark-blue serge dress, with a linen collar and a little red necktie—attire intended by Rosa to be scrupulously that of a young English lady. Nor was the short hair, tied back with a ribbon, so unusual as to be peculiar. Yet she looked, as she stood glancing around, half shy, half observant, something like a

hare in a flower-garden, just ready to dash away. In consideration of the fatigue of her journey, which had ended late the night before, she had had her breakfast upstairs, and was now really making and receiving her first impressions.

Rosa and Beatrice Grey were talking fast to each other in a rapid exchange of question and answer ; while the aunt and younger cousins were studying this soft-eyed, fawn-like creature, so utterly unlike their self-possessed selves.

‘So, my dear,’ said her aunt kindly, ‘we have got you here at last. And you must tell the girls all you like best to do, that they may be able to amuse you.’

‘I do not know what anyone does here exactly,’ said Violante, afraid of her own voice, as she wondered if her English was *very* foreign.

‘Hasn’t Rosa told you how we all get on?’ said Kitty.

‘Yes,’ said Violante. ‘I thought I knew; but, after all, I did not imagine it.’

Kitty laughed kindly.

‘You dear little thing!’ she said, ‘you will soon find it all out. And you haven’t got the least bit of voice to sing to us with?’

‘No—I cannot sing!’ said Violante, shyly.

‘Ah, we shall make you tell us all your history,’ said Mary, wishing to set her at her ease; ‘all about your stage-life and its wonders.’

‘*That* was not very wonderful,’ said Violante, while Rosa interposed :

‘She had very little time to judge of it before she was ill, and now I think she would be glad to forget it.’

‘Ah, well, we must make her into an English girl,’ said Mrs. Grey. ‘We will talk of schools and pupils by and by; first we will show her a little of the world. Is she as fond of parties as you were, Rosa? How

wild a dance made you, good, sober girl as you were.'

'She has never been to a party,' said Rosa, laughing; 'and I am not sure if she can dance—off the stage.'

'Oh, yes, I can, Rosina—Maddalena taught me.'

'Do you remember going to parties at the Stanforths', Rosa?' said Miss Grey curiously.

'Yes—very well. Do you know them still?' said Rosa.

'Oh, yes—,' and here followed details of old acquaintances and new pictures, to which Violante listened in silent wonder. The Greys were fond of little schemes and surprises, so they told their cousins nothing of the old acquaintance whom they expected them soon to meet; and nothing occurred to make all these perplexing novelties more perplexing still.

'Shall you be happy here, my darling?'

said Rosa, anxiously, as, in the first interval of solitude, Violante sprang to her side and eagerly caressed her.

‘Oh, yes!—yes!’ said Violante; ‘quite happy when I see you. But how strange it would be to have so many sisters! How busy they are, and how many things they can do! Rosa mia! I see now what everyone meant by saying that you were so English. But I like it.’

Violante’s life during the next week or two was not such as to make a figure in history. She was the prettiest plaything her cousins had ever seen. Her ignorance of ordinary life, her shy softness, and absence of self-assertion, made her seem to them as a specially-lovely kitten, and they never guessed that anything lay beneath. They interpreted all her actions in accordance with the impression that she had made on them. They were fond of reading aloud to each other, and when a passionate and mournful

love-scene moved Violante, unused to the echoes of her own heart, to tears and blushes, they laughed at her *naïveté* and simplicity. When she shrank from questions about her theatrical life they concluded that she had nothing to tell of it, and they treated the idea of her teaching Italian at school as an absurd joke.

‘But I must earn my living,’ said Violante, gravely.

‘*You* earn your living—you kitten!’ said Beatrice.

‘Yes—one must do something, and I cannot sing—or marry,’ said Violante, and her cousins’ laughter at what seemed to the foreign girl a perfectly natural suggestion blinded them to the fact that there was more knowledge of the struggle of life in her words than had ever come to them over their drawing-room carpets. But they taught her to talk, and diminished her shyness so that she could not have been in a better atmosphere.

To Rosa the life came with no strangeness ; rather her four years of Italy were like a dream. Surely—surely it was but yesterday that she had trimmed her dresses for other parties at the Stanforths' and Comptons', where Lucy was then so anxious to go. Was there *now* nothing to give the old zest to her preparations? Only the desire to set off Violante, and to see her enjoying herself. But Rosa's world was, indeed, full of 'other folks ;' and she did not decide on her actions with regard to herself. And great questions were agitating themselves in her mind during these early and apparently peaceful days. Her aunt told her of the fortunate opening which she had found for her at Mrs. Bosanquet's.

'And you see, my dear, the money is as much as you would get anywhere. You could continue it if your father does come to England in the spring, as he proposes. It leaves you time for a few

occasional pupils, and you would have your evenings at home—an inestimable advantage if Violante is with you.’

‘I know my father thinks that, if her voice returns and we stay in England, she might sing at concerts and oratorios. But I don’t think she will ever be able to do anything in public.’

‘Oh, dear me, Rosa, she is a child; she will be a different person in a year or two. But I agree with you, she is not suited for it, and must be well taken care of.’

‘Indeed, I must take care of her!’

Rosa said no more, and her aunt never supposed that she had any hesitation as to availing herself of the excellent opportunity before her; and, indeed, as Rosa listened, she felt that her alternative grew more remote. But it lost nothing in fascination.

After they had been about a week at Kensington some tickets were sent to Mrs. Grey for “The School for Scandal”—then

being performed. Violante did not go : she shrank from the very thought of a theatre ; and, as Rosa was by no means anxious to expose her to unnecessary cold and fatigue, she remained at home, while Mr. Grey took his eldest daughter and Rosa.

It was a long time since Rosa had seen any acting, and she sat like one bewitched, with hot cheeks and bright eyes, her hands clasped before her—now delighted, now impatient—her lips moving in sympathy or correction—absorbed as she had not been for years. Mr. Grey thought what a very handsome young woman his niece was, with her fine eyes and intense expression ; but her cousin Beatrice, who had been in the old days more than anyone else her friend, watched her curiously, and when they came home said :

‘Come into my room, and brush your hair, and then you will not disturb Violante ! So you are as fond of acting as ever, Rosa ?’

‘Fond of it!’ ejaculated Rosa. ‘Oh, Trixy, I must, I must! I can’t give it up again. Surely there must be some way!’

‘Rosa! you don’t mean to say you are thinking of it seriously?’

‘It would be just life to me,’ said Rosa, passionately, and almost crying, as she brushed her hair over her face.

Miss Grey laid aside a modest portion of accessory plaits as she said, gravely—

‘You see, Rose, “life,” as you call it, is just what most people don’t get. And I’m sure you would not like it; you are not the sort of girl.’

‘Yes, I am!’ said Rosa, with petulance. ‘Nobody understands. They think because I *can* work and teach, and take care of myself and other people, and look serious, that that’s all of me, and that I’m good and quiet. But I’m *not*, if being good means being contented in—in a pond with a fence all round it. I should *like* to knock about,

have to take care of myself, and live in a lodging! I *like* the gas and the fun, and the ups and downs of it, and not being sure of succeeding; and if Violante was married I'd do it to-morrow!'

'But, Rosa——'

'But, Trixy, I mean what I say. I *can* act as I can do nothing else; but whether it is possible for me to be an actress is another thing, I know very well. It couldn't make much difference to all of you——could it?'

'Well, no,' said Beatrice, 'I don't think we should consider that it did. But, Rosa, you would either have to begin in the smallest possible way, or else study for years; and how could you pay for getting yourself taught? You might ask Mr. A——,' mentioning an eminent actor of well-known kindness and respectability; 'he sometimes comes here. But when there's the other thing all ready for you!'

'Oh, Trixy, I know,' said Rosa. 'But of

course,' she added, 'I can't be expected to feel that it would be unsuitable. If I had a voice—oh! if I had—what it would have saved Violante and me!'

'You gave up the idea once before,' said Beatrice.

'Yes,' said Rosa, rather faintly.

'There was something then you would have liked better still, eh! Rose?'

'Yes,' said Rosa, with a sudden heart-throb.

'I'm afraid he wasn't good for much, Rosy,' said her cousin, patting her hair.

'You never hear of him now?' said Rosa.

'Never. Everyone doesn't get Lucy's luck, you know, and when things go wrong one must put up with second-best.'

'I am to have neither first or second,' said Rosa.

'Well, there's a good deal of third in the world, and one gets on with it.'

‘The long and the short of it is,’ said Rosa, as she stood up to go, ‘that that’s my wish, but I can’t turn the world upside down to get it, and I can live without it, as I’ve done before. Why, I almost forgot it till things went wrong with Violante. Anyhow, I must take care of her.’

Beatrice Grey, spite of her easy life, had not found the world accommodate itself so exactly to her wishes as to be surprised at the necessity for submission, but she was struck by Rosa’s last words, and said :

‘You’re the best girl I know, Rosa.’

‘I mustn’t go to many plays if you are to hold that opinion long,’ replied Rosa, as she went away.

‘Did you enjoy yourself, Rosina mia?’ said Violante, sleepily.

‘Yes, my darling,’ said Rosa, ‘so much so that next time you must come and look after me.’

Violante gave a little sleepy laugh at

this absurd notion, as her sister, wakeful with excitement, lay down by her side.

Rosa was not exactly conscious of making a sacrifice: she rather felt herself yielding to a powerful necessity. Of course, the family well-being and Violante's happiness must come first, whatever happened. She must act prudently. Life had taught her prudence; only her hot nature rebelled sometimes. Her age and experience taught her that she could live without being an actress. She lay thinking of her life and her sister's—not cynically, but without any youthful illusions. Her first ambition seemed impracticable—her first love was a thing of the past.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

‘Strange, yet familiar things.’

THE scene of Violante's first party was a great rambling house in Kensington—half old, half new—with odd passages and corners, and steps up and down; incongruous, and yet comfortable; and full of all the daring innovations and the unexpected revivals of an artist's taste. Mr. Stanforth gave his visitors pleasant things to look at, and pleasant people to talk to; and, while a fair share both of things and people were enough out of the common to amuse by exciting criticism, here and there was a

work of art, and here and there a famous person standing on a higher level, and rousing enthusiasm and admiration. Besides, the large and lively family party were always ready for schemes of amusement; and there were no such private theatricals, no such drawing-room concerts and impromptu dances anywhere else—at least, so thought the Miss Greys. To the young Violante the scene had all the wonder of absolute novelty; to her sister the tender interest of an unforgotten past. Rosa remembered the play which she had acted there, when applause had lighted the first spark of ambition; but she seemed to live over again the day, three months later, when that fire had paled before an intenser flame. The scene was the same, but the play had been altered to make room for new actors; and Violante, in her white dress, with Christmas roses crowning her soft cloudy hair, stood in the front.

‘That girl is like starlight,’ someone

said, and Rosa speedily became aware that her sister was one of the things to be looked at to-night. Rosa herself received a warm greeting; and their kind and pleasant host took the two sisters into his studio, that the younger one, at least, might both see and be seen.

‘I am afraid the artistic eyes of Italy will see much to criticise,’ he said, with a smile. ‘You are used to pictures?’

‘I thought they were all painted long ago,’ said Violante, ‘except the copies;’ for Civita Bella had not offered many facilities or attractions to painters, and having been behind the scenes of one art did not lessen her wonder at the other. She stared in amazement at recognising the original of a peasant girl on the wall in the fashionably-dressed young lady who was showing off the pictures, and when the same face which she had admired under a helmet in a picture was pointed out to her above a white tie-

among the guests; and smiled as its owner handed her a seat, she felt as if the world was very wonderful, unconscious of her own similar and very superior claims to be an object of interest.

‘Come and see papa’s new picture!’ said one of the girls of the house, smiling, to a new arrival, and James Crichton followed her to the door of the studio.

‘Isn’t it a lovely one?’ she said.

There stood Violante, as he had seen her once before, the centre of a group, not now pale and frightened, but flushed and smiling; silent, indeed, and shy, but with eyes that were full of life; her childish pathetic charm brightened into unmistakable beauty; the great artist enlightening her ignorance, and half the young men in the company seized with artistic fervour.

‘Don’t break the spell,’ said Jem, drawing back. He had had some vague notion of the possibility of seeing her at this party, but never like this.

There was generally a little dancing at the Stanforths in the course of the evening, and now James beheld the artist's handsome model petition Violante for a quadrille with considerable *empressement*. She looked a little shy and doubtful, but finally let him lead her away; while as he passed Miss Stanforth he smiled and whispered triumphantly, 'I've got the beauty!'

And James was suddenly seized with a sensation of fierce unreasonable jealousy on his brother's account. 'Was this the state of things he had wasted his pity upon? She had not fretted much! After all poor old Hugh had gone through, while he was in trouble and working hard, unable to bear the sound of her name, *she* could laugh and flirt and enjoy herself. It was always the way!'

In short, if James had ardently desired that his brother should win Violante he could not have been more put out at seeing her the object of other men's attention, or at

watching her gradually take courage as her partner evidently took pains to teach her the unfamiliar figures. How graceful she was and how sweet her smile !

Jem's anger was never very long-lived, and before the end of the quadrille he was smiling to himself and speculating on what she would say when he made himself known to her. He turned a little as this thought occurred to him, and came face to face with Rosa Mattei. She started violently, evidently quite unprepared to see him, and then made a stiff little bow.

'Ah, you have met !' exclaimed Miss Grey, joining them. 'I did not tell my cousin she was to meet a friend.'

'I had no notion of it,' said Rosa, abruptly.

'*I* was not altogether unprepared,' said James. 'Signor Mattei is not with you ?'

'No. My father is in Florence.'

'And your sister ?—I hope she is well.'

‘She is very well, thank you.’

Both Jem and Rosa felt antagonistic. ‘Why,’ thought she, ‘had he come like a ghost to disturb Violante’s peace?’

‘What had brought these girls to England?’ thought he. ‘Did they want to seek Hugh out?’

There was an awkward little pause, which was broken by a lady, a friend of James’s mother, who came up to him and asked after his brother.

‘Very well, thank you. He is at home—not here,’ returned James, conscious that Rosa looked relieved at the intelligence.

‘And your cousin Arthur?’

‘Well, we have pretty good accounts from him, I think. Miss Mattei,’ he added, ‘I believe you met my cousin at Caletto.’

‘*Your* cousin! Mr. Pinsher—Spencer. Ah, I see! our Italian friend mistook the name; but we certainly did meet an English gentleman at Caletto.’

James never could endure to be on bad terms with anyone. The first attempt at a snub, far from repelling him, only set him to work to find a vulnerable point. Rosa's stiffness was irresistible, and, besides, he was anxious to hear of Arthur.

‘How very singular!’ he said. ‘He mentioned you in one of his letters. Do tell me, Miss Mattei, if he struck you as looking out of health or spirits?’

‘No; I think he was quite well,’ said Rosa; then, remembering Violante's impression: ‘He may have seemed rather sad at times, but I did not see much of him.’

‘He went abroad to try to recover from a great shock. The lady he was engaged to died.’

‘How very sad!’ exclaimed Rosa, feeling that this was much at variance with her distrustful impressions.

‘Yes. We have had a good deal of trouble since we met last, Miss Mattei.

Holidays are soon over in this work-a-day world.'

James looked rather sentimental, though his expressions were quite genuine.

'We have had some trouble too,' said Rosa, 'but it is now, I hope, over. I have occupation in London, and my sister is going to school.'

'To school! Well, this is a world of changes; but there was something in all that sunshine and blue sky after all. And the Tollemaches; oh, weren't the Tollemaches really nice people—so kind!'

Before Rosa could answer, Violante's partner brought her back. James drew out of sight for a moment. Away from the overpowering force of Hugh's reality, he was possessed by a lively interest in the strange turns events were taking. He studied the situation as if it had been a work of art and he a collector, not cynically or critically,

but with the affectionate interest of an amateur in picturesque episodes.

Violante looked bright-eyed and rosy.

‘Did you see, Rosina? I have been dancing. That was such a nice partner! I was not afraid of him long. And there is his picture. Did you see?’

‘Oh, yes, dear; I saw it all,’ said Rosa; while James thought: ‘Not inconsolable!’

Suddenly Violante looked up and saw him. She turned pale, then suddenly out of her eyes flashed a look of unspeakable joy, that outshone her childish gaiety and put it out of sight. She glanced all round the room with an eagerness more touching and convincing than any degree of alarm or agitation; and, perhaps, her stage-training in self-command stood her in good stead, for she made no scene, but took James’s offered hand, and looked in his face with a look of happy expectation that touched him more than he could say.

‘So you have come to England, mademoiselle,’ he said. ‘Do you like it? I have been talking to your sister, and she tells me you met my cousin—in Italy.’

‘Signor Arthur!’ exclaimed Violante, with instant comprehension.

‘Yes—Arthur Spencer—do you recollect him?’

‘Oh, yes! He told me about England,’ said Violante, eagerly; but even while she spoke the brightness began to fade out of her face. She *knew* that Hugh was not there, and that James was not going to speak to her about him. He, on his side, felt the attitude he was forced to assume so embarrassing that he gladly availed himself of the first excuse to turn away. She, poor child, could only feel that suddenly her part in this delightful party became like a part in a play. She must act her own character, crush back her surprise and pain, and look as usual. Perhaps, nothing but long habit

could have enabled her to do so ; she found herself smiling her old stage smile, her fingers felt cold as they used to do at the opera, her eyes took their old stupid look, and the music surged in her ears like the music of the opera orchestra. She was not going to cry or faint now any more than then, but all her sweet spontaneous pleasure was destroyed.

‘I felt as if I was acting,’ was all she said to Rosa, afterwards, when the confusing scene was over, and she and her sister were alone.

‘My darling,’ said Rosa, ‘it was too hard that your pleasure should be spoilt like this.’ Rosa was sitting by their bed-room fire, and Violante, half-undressed, sat on the rug leaning against her knees. She did not answer for a moment, and then said, rather imperiously :

‘Tell me everything he said to you.’

‘I don’t think he was pleased to see us,’

said Rosa. 'I heard him say his brother was in the country, and that he was quite well.'

'Ah!' murmured Violante.

'And he told me that Signor Arthur, as you call him, had lost the girl he was engaged to—that she is dead.'

'I knew she was dead : he told me so.'

'Did he? but, in short, Violante, I hope you won't let this meeting dwell in your mind. What is past, is past; and—you won't be unhappy, my child, will you?'

'No,' said Violante, slowly, and with some reserve.

She was disturbed and agitated; but she was very far from hopeless. Now that the seas did not divide them, anything seemed possible: she might meet him in the street—he might seek her again. But slow days passed, and she did not see him, while James, the Greys heard, went out of town for Christmas. The poor child had many

weary yearning hours; but pleasure and novelty and affectionate kindness were not powerless; nor was she miserable. During these days Rosa's choice of an occupation was determined—at any rate, for the present. Her uncle offered her a home in his house until her father came to England, if she accepted the situation of daily governess to Mrs. Bosanquet. She found that the stage could not be for the present remunerative; and, even with Violante's schooling provided for, the two sisters had to clothe themselves; and she could not bear to be a burden on such kind relations. So when the moment of decision came she told her aunt that she would do her best for the little Bosanquets, and thanked her heartily for her recommendation.

‘I can do it, as I’ve done before,’ she said, ‘and I *will*. But now, Aunt Beatrice, will you tell me something about this school for Violante? Do they know who she is?’

‘Oh, yes. Miss Venning is an old friend of mine. We haven’t met for some years now; but she is a most excellent and kind-hearted person; and her two sisters, who are quite young, are, I believe, admirable. I am sure Violante will meet with nothing but kindness, and it will do her good to fend for herself a little.’

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ said Rosa doubtfully, ‘and she must learn self-reliance, poor child!’

She thought secretly that it would be well to shield Violante from encounters with James Crichton, and that at least she would be safe at school. But Rosa was very miserable at this time. She had not given up her prospects without scorching tears of disappointment. Four years back seemed nearly as recent to her regretful memory as four months to Violante’s; and now she must part with her child and lose the caresses that were the sweetest things in life to

her. Violante grew frightened as the time drew near, and clung to her more closely than ever; but she never uttered a word of resistance, and regarded the going to school, as she had done the coming to England, with the same curious under-current of inclination.

In the middle of January Mrs. Grey received a letter from Miss Venning, saying :

‘My sister Florence has been in London, and will return on the 18th. If you would like it she will bring your niece back with her—it is the day we re-open school.’

This arrangement was gladly acceded to ; and on a clear cold morning Violante, well wrapped up, walked up and down the long platform from which she was to start, furtively holding Rosa’s fingers in her muff, and looking about for a school-mistress very unlike the tall, fair, rosy-faced girl who came rapidly up to the appointed meeting-place.

‘Miss Florence Venning?’ said Mrs. Grey.

‘How do you do? Here are my nieces, and this is Violante.’

Florence shook hands with them, and answered enquiries for her eldest sister, and then, as Mrs. Grey said something aside about her niece's shyness and grief at leaving her sister, she answered, in a kind, yet matter-of-course manner :

‘Oh, yes. I daresay she minds it very much ; but she'll soon be quite happy again, I'm sure. I hope we shall be very good friends.’ ‘You are a governess, too, aren't you?’ she added, to Rosa, with a view to making acquaintance.

‘Yes,’ said Rosa, rather faintly.

‘I think one is quite glad to get to work again after the holidays. I always feel ready to begin. We ought to get in, I think. Will you come now, signorina? That is what we must call you, I suppose?’

Flossy's breezy abruptness was better, perhaps, than a more open sympathy. But

when she saw the two sisters cling together, and heard Rosa's murmured 'My darling, my darling!' her blue eyes filled with quick, kindly tears.

'I'll take ever so much care of her!' she said, impulsively. 'Don't be afraid.'

Poor Rosa looked quite fierce with misery; but the inexorable bell rang, the door was shut between the sisters, and while the many struggles of Rosa's last few weeks found vent in a fit of uncontrollable sobbing, Violante was whirled away, through the frosty fields and wintry hedgerows, to Oxley and Redhurst—to the very neighbourhood of Hugh Crichton.

PART V.

HAUNTED.

‘And ghosts unseen
Crept in between
And marred our harmony.’

CHAPTER XXIX.

SCHOOL.

‘Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,’

THE bells of S. Michael’s Church were ringing a joyous peal as Violante set foot in Oxley. There had been a wedding in the morning, and the bells were honouring the bride with a final peal, as the sun sank low in the clear, cold sky and the wintry moon rose white against the rosy sunset. Below, people stamped through the street, and the horses’ hoofs sounded sharply on the hard road. The lamps flashed out one by one, the outlines of the buildings were still visible.

‘That is the Bank,’ said Flossy, as they drove past.

Violante looked, and saw the handsome white building, already closed for the night, and the dark red house beside it where one light showed in an upstairs window. She was too much bewildered to care to speculate about it. They passed out of the town along the road, with its pretty villas with cheerful lights shining from the windows, past the nursery-gardens and scattered cottages, beyond which, the last house in the borough of Oxley, stood Oxley Manor.

‘Here we are,’ said Flossy, brightly. ‘We shall be just in time for some tea. Ah, how d’ye do, Anne,’ to the servant that opened the door. ‘Yes; half-a-crown, that’s right. This is Miss Mattei’s luggage. Come in, signorina! Well, Mary, here she is.’

And Violante found herself warmly and kindly greeted and led into a pleasantly-lighted drawing-room, while Miss Venning enquired for her aunt and cousins.

‘They are quite well, signora,’ said

Violante, in her soft, liquid voice. She felt shy, but then she was not expected to do anything but speak when she was spoken to, and, being confiding as well as timid, she warmed at once to a kind word.

‘Give them some tea, Clarissa,’ said Miss Venning. ‘They have had a very cold journey, and then Miss Mattei can take off her things before the school tea.’

‘We arrived to the sound of wedding bells. For Ada Morrison, I suppose?’ said Flossy.

‘Yes; it has made quite an auspicious beginning for you, my dear,’ to Violante.

‘That is pleasant,’ said Violante, shyly.

‘Yes; a good beginning is half-way to a good ending. So remember that, my dear, in all your work,’ said Miss Venning, sonorously.

‘Now come with me,’ said Florence, ‘and I will introduce you to Edith Robertson. She

teaches the little ones English and drawing and learns the higher branches.'

Whether Violante had much idea of what fruit might grow in this lofty situation may be doubtful, but she followed Flossy to a large room, brightly lit with gas, where, what Violante afterwards described to Rosa as 'as many girls as there are singers in a chorus,' were enjoying the leisure of recent arrival after the holidays. There was a cry of 'Miss Florence, Miss Florence!' and such a confusion of greetings and embraces ensued as made Violante quite dizzy; but presently Florence extricated from the crowd a short, plain, clever-faced girl of nineteen or twenty, introduced her as Miss Robertson, and told her to show Violante her room and to tell her a few of the ways of the house, while she returned to her sisters.

'Well,' she cried, as she came back into the drawing-room and sat down on the rug for a comfortable chat. 'Isn't she a little dear?

She cried, and so did her sister, who looks a famous person ; but she soon cheered up.'

'And, pray, do you expect her to be of any use?' asked Clarissa. 'She looks about as much like a governess as——'

'A public singer,' said Flossy.

'Yes,' said Miss Venning. 'Mrs. Grey was quite right in saying there was nothing unsuitable in her appearance.'

'Oh, nor in herself,' said Flossy. 'She is a mere child, evidently; but, of course, she can speak her own language, and that is all we want. And it will be very interesting to study a mind that has had so different an experience from one's own.'

'Always presupposing,' said Clarissa, 'that she has a mind to study.'

'Now, Clarissa, you know I hate that idea that people must have a certain amount of stereotyped cleverness before they can be supposed to have any characters. *No one* is commonplace, or like anybody else, if one

really understands them. They say even sheep are all different, and I'm sure girls are. The most unexpected developments——'

'Well, Flossy, never mind all that,' said Miss Venning. 'You shall do as you like with Miss Mattei, and I daresay you will make something of her.'

'Oh, I feel sure of it. But, now, how is everyone? Is there any news?'

'Yes; Mrs. Crichton comes home next week; so I think Freddie will not come back as a boarder.'

'It will be very dull for her at home, poor child,' said Flossy, gravely.

'Well, Mrs. Crichton writes, in her usual energetic way, that she thinks it a duty to keep the house as cheerful as possible; and she means to ask a friend Freddie has made at Bournemouth to stay with her. She hopes, too, that Hugh will live at home as usual.'

'He will not be an element of cheerful-

ness,' said Clarissa. 'I met him riding yesterday, and I never saw so gloomy a face.'

'And Arthur?' said Flossy.

'I don't think his plans are settled yet; but Mrs. Crichton says he writes cheerfully.'

'I don't think much of those cheerful letters,' said Flossy, sadly. 'What can he say? How will one ever go to Redhurst? Ah, there's a ring! That's the Pembertons, no doubt. I must get ready for tea.'

At six o'clock Violante found herself sitting at tea in a large, cheerful room, and gradually took courage to make her observations on the new scene before her. She was placed among the elder girls, who were exceedingly polite to her, for Flossy's genial influence told in the tone of the school; but she felt more attracted towards a row of long-haired lesser ones, for whom Miss Robertson was making tea. 'I should like to do that,' she thought; 'I hope they will love me.' There was a grand French governess, who

looked formidable; and who, to tell the truth, was the only person of whom Miss Florence stood in awe, and who regarded her merely as a big girl and not as a theorist in education. There was also a younger and quieter-looking German, and about thirty pupils. There was a good deal of conversation, and plenty to eat. Violante occupied at night the same room with Miss Robertson, a pleasant one enough. Her companion pretended not to notice the tears which the longing for Rosa's good nights could not fail to bring. She had seen a good many school-girls cry, since she had been sent to an orphanage for clergymen's daughters at eight years old; and she thought everyone ought to appreciate their good luck in being at Oxley Manor—certainly a little ignorant foreigner, who was, besides, too old and too tall to be legitimately homesick. She must learn not to be a helpless child. But Violante's beauty and fascinating sweetness were a magic armour with which

to face this new world. Everyone, even her stern young judge, was kindly disposed towards her and ready to make allowance for her ignorance and helplessness.

Miss Venning, however much licence she might allow to Florence, was very really the mistress of her school. The girls, Flossy included, read the Bible to her every morning—a ceremony almost as alarming to Violante as standing up to sing. When this was over Miss Venning called her, and said :

‘Now, my dear, tell me what you can do?’

‘I cannot do anything, signora. I am very stupid,’ faltered Violante. ‘I will try.’

‘What have you learnt?’

‘English. I know English, and just a little French and music.’

‘Have you read much of your own literature—Dante or Tasso?’

‘No, signora.’

‘Read me a piece of this,’ said Miss

Venning, putting a volume of Italian poetry into her hands that she might judge of her accent. Frightened as Violante was, and little as she had responded to her long technical training, she declaimed the verses in a very much more vigorous style than Miss Venning expected.

‘That is very well,’ she said. ‘You must read Italian with Miss Florence, and help her to teach her class.’

‘Signora,’ said Violante, emboldened by the praise, ‘I can knit and sew and embroider. I could teach these to the young ladies.’

‘And you shall,’ said Flossy, who was standing close by. ‘Sister, we’ll make needlework popular.’

‘They are very pleasant occupations,’ said Miss Venning. ‘Now, let me hear you play; for it will be part of your duty to overlook the little girls at their music.’

Violante played very prettily, though her

fingers had comparatively been little cultivated ; but she refused even to attempt to sing, flushing and trembling in a way quite inexplicable, if the Miss Vennings had known nothing of her former history.

‘Well, my dear,’ said Miss Venning, ‘you have a great deal to learn, and a little to teach. We will do our best to make you happy among us, and you on your part will, no doubt, be industrious and obedient.’

‘Yes, signora,’ said Violante, a good deal impressed by the profundity of Miss Venning’s manners.

‘And one thing I wish you to notice. As you make friends with your companions, do not make the details of your former life a matter of conversation. You have no need to be ashamed of it ; but it would excite great curiosity, and you might be questioned in a way you would not like.’

‘It is only *silly* girls who wish to talk,’ said Violante, quoting a sentiment of Rosa’s, and looking slightly hurt.

‘Then do you be wise,’ said Miss Venning, rather amused. ‘Now go to your lessons.’

Violante dropped into the routine of her new life with surprising quickness. She did not dislike it; but, as she wrote to Rosa: ‘There is so much that I do not understand.’ She found herself, of course, very ignorant; but either her teachers found teaching her a pleasant task, or she had exaggerated her own dulness, for no one gave her up as hopeless. She even managed to exercise a sort of control on the few occasions when she was forced to assume authority. The little girls delighted in her, and her greatest pleasure was to do their hair for them, make them pretty things, teach them fancy-work, and be generally a slave to them. She was willing to assume any amount of the play-time responsibility generally considered so irksome, and, as Clarissa observed, would have been ‘all nursery, and no governess,’

instead of sharing the prevailing tendency in the opposite direction. The elder ones were very fond of her, but, though she responded quickly to kindness, she did not bestow any depth of affection on anyone but Miss Florence, whom she regarded as a superior being. Flossy was a perpetual wonder to her. Rosa had been a fairly efficient and conscientious teacher; but, assuredly, she had not found it her greatest delight, nor rattled away even to such an uncomprehending listener as Violante of classes and examinations and the principles of education. She had not taken so vivid an interest in each one of her pupils, nor been so anxious to extend her sphere of labour, that she could scarcely, as Flossy's sisters said, see a girl passing in the street without wanting to teach her, and had always a plea for extending some of the advantages of Oxley Manor 'just this once' to some poor little outsider who stood just 'next' in the social scale to those

who already enjoyed them. And she could do so many things herself. The girls said Miss Florence was writing a book, and she certainly drew nearly as well as the master. She could make her dresses, too, *not* quite so well as the dressmaker, and was much prouder of them than of the drawing or the book either. Enthusiasm is infectious. Violante caught the prevailing tone and worshipped Miss Florence with innocent ardour. It was a somewhat dangerous atmosphere for Flossy, but she was more wrapped up in her occupations than in herself; she heartily loved her admiring pupils, and had her own enthusiasms in other directions.

There were two schoolrooms at Oxley Manor; and in the larger one, in the dusky firelight of a Saturday afternoon, the two young 'pupil teachers,' for which simple name Flossy was wont to contend, sat learning some French poetry. Violante did not

like learning her lessons, it reminded her too much of learning her parts ; but, then, as she reflected, it did not matter nearly so much if she could not say them. She sat on a stool in a corner by the mantelpiece, her face framed in its softly-curling locks, in shadow, and the firelight dancing on her book and on her childish, delicate hands—hands that looked fit only to cling and caress, belying their fair share of deftness and skill. Miss Robertson sat on a chair, and held her book before her eyes, for she was short-sighted. She had chilblains, and occasionally rubbed her fingers. Her companion's idleness was quite an interruption to her ; she felt obliged to keep her in order.

‘ You don’t seem to get on with your poetry, signorina,’ she said, giving the title which attached to Violante as a sort of Christian name.

‘ No, it is hard.’

‘One must give one’s mind to it. I don’t think you take a sufficiently serious view of life, signorina.’

‘A serious view?’ repeated Violante.

‘Well, of work, you know. Look at Miss Florence. What do you suppose makes her so energetic and useful?’

‘I suppose,’ said Violante, ‘that she is like my father, and has enthusiasm. And, perhaps, she has not much else to think of. She is very happy.’

‘Do you mean that no one should work at what they don’t like?’

‘Oh, yes; but it is much harder, especially when there is so much besides,’ said Violante. She did not mean to turn the tables on her companion, but merely to state a simple fact.

‘I don’t see,’ said Miss Robertson, ‘what can be more important than getting ready to earn one’s living.’

‘Yes—we must do that—if we can,’ said Violante.

‘I assure you,’ said Miss Robertson, ‘things would be very different here if it weren’t for Florence Venning. I’ve been at other schools and I know. You and I would not have such good times without her.’

‘Oh, she is good and beautiful!’ cried Violante. ‘I would learn lessons all day to please her. Where is she now?’

‘She is gone to Redhurst?’ said Edith, gravely.

‘Redhurst?’

‘Yes. Have none of the girls told you about poor Mysie Crofton?’

‘No, who is she?’

‘She used to come here to school, and—it happened last summer before I came; but they often talk of it—she was drowned.’

‘Oh, how sad! Did she fall into the water?’

‘She was going to be married, and her lover and his cousin were shooting, and they saw her standing on the lock, and Mr. Crichton——’

‘Who?’

‘Mr. Hugh Crichton. He lives at Redhurst, don’t you know? She was going to marry his cousin, Mr. Spencer. Well, they were shooting, and—it was very awful—but Mr. Crichton’s gun frightened her, and she fell into the water and was drowned.’

Violante sat in the shadow. Her dead silence might have come from her interest in the story.

‘That’s not the worst. They say Arthur Spencer told him not to fire—and he did——’

‘Was he jealous?’ suddenly cried Violante.

‘Good gracious, signorina! What a horrid—what a ridiculous idea! How foreign! Of course not. He didn’t mean to hurt her. He was half mad with grief. I’m sure *now*

he looks as if he couldn't smile—and Mr. Spencer has been abroad ever since it happened—last August.'

Violante sat in her corner, her heart beating, shivering, her face burning. 'He is near—' Then that wild foolish thought of the poor foreign opera-taught girl gave place to a pang of shame, and then, 'He is unhappy.' She had forgotten herself—forgotten where she was; when Miss Florence came slowly into the room in her hat and jacket. She came and knelt down by the fire, looking much graver than usual.

'Frederica comes to school on Monday,' she said, in rather a strained voice.

'How were they, Miss Florence?' asked Edith.

'Oh, I don't know. Mrs. Crichton is very well. They are hardly settled.'

'I was telling signorina,' said Miss Robertson.

Flossy looked at Violante.

‘Why, you have frightened her!’ she said, ‘with our sad story.’

Violante could not speak; but something in Flossy’s trembling lips spoke to her heart. She pressed up close to her and hid her face on her shoulder.

‘Why, my dear child, how you tremble!’ cried Flossy, touched by the action and by the sympathy, as she thought it. ‘Hush, *we* have almost left off crying for her!’

‘I never thought it would make you hysterical,’ said Miss Robertson, rather severely.

‘Let her alone,’ said Florence, for all her tenderest strings were still quivering with the renewal of old associations, and somehow this girl, who cried for her dear Mysie, spoke to her heart as no one had done since Mysie’s star had set. Violante clung closer and closer, conscious of nothing but a sense of help and fellowship in the stormy sea that had suddenly burst in on her. She had lost

all sense of concealment, she forgot that Flossy did not know her secret ; she was only silent because no words adequate to her bewildered horror suggested themselves. At last she half sobbed out :

‘ And he killed her—killed her ? ’

‘ Oh, no ; you must not say that,’ said Flossy. ‘ It was a very sad accident, but poor Hugh could not help it, and Arthur never blamed him. She was so good, so sweet. But you must not cry, dear ; why are you so startled ? ’ she added, becoming aware that Violante’s agitation was excessive, though, on the score of her Italian actress-ship, she was not prepared to consider it unnatural.

Violante was slowly coming to herself. She sat up and pushed back her hair ; while things began to arrange themselves in her mind. Hugh Crichton lived close at hand ; she might see him, and he had been in a great storm of trouble—was that why she had heard nothing of him ? Then Signor Arthur

—she remembered how James Crichton had told Rosa that his cousin's love was dead. Here was something she could say.

‘Signora, I met Signor Arthur Spencer in Italy at Caletto. That was partly——’ She stumbled over the truth so like a lie ; but Flossy broke in—

‘Saw Arthur ? Did you ? Oh, tell me—how was he—what did he look like ?’

‘He was very sad—I knew that, though he used to come and talk and laugh with us. He was travelling. And when I knew we were coming to England I asked him what English girls were like ? And, oh, Miss Florence, I knew he spoke of one he loved who was dead. But he told me to be brave. He is so !’

It did not strike Flossy at the moment to be surprised at Violante's interest in Arthur and his story ; the subject was too interesting to herself, but the fact dropped into her mind and was recalled in the future. Now

she asked a few more questions about him, and in return told Violante a little of the circumstances of his trouble, till they were obliged to separate to dress for tea. Violante crept away to her room, and as she stood by herself in the dark she felt that she had in a manner deceived Miss Florence. ‘But,’ thought she—*He* shall say first he knows me—if he will. When shall I see him? How shall I see him? Oh, never—shut up here! Hugo—ah, Hugo mio!’

Yet she felt full of expectation, full of something like hope. ‘I will tell Rosa if I see Signor Arthur,’ she thought; ‘but if I tell her who is near she will be angry and foolish and take me away. It will not hurt me.’

So, to excuse herself to her own conscience for thus concealing so important a fact from her sister, she found heart to go through her work as usual, teaching and learning, with one question ever before her,

one expectation filling her life. She could tell Rosa when she could talk to her, she thought ; but a letter would give a false impression, and make her sister anxious to no purpose.

CHAPTER XXX.

DISCORDS.

‘ Those blind motions of the spring
That show the year has turned.’

REDHURST was entirely unused to absenteeism. Mrs. Crichton had scarcely ever spent five months together away from it in her life, and now she seemed to have taken with her all the movement and interest of the place. From the time when the little heiress had ridden out with her father on her long-tailed pony, all through the days of her bright, joyous young ladyhood, and happy, active wifehood, she had lived among her own people; and, as she was both an affec-

tionate and conscientious woman, she had fulfilled her duties towards them well, and found and given much pleasure in the fulfilment. Moreover, besides the Rector, the Crichtons had been the only resident gentry in the parish, though there was a large neighbourhood beyond its bounds. Substantial benefits were not intermitted, and Hugh was far too conscientious to neglect his local duties; but kind words and gossip were missing. Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt seemed to have grown years older; the girls, who had been wont to admire Mysie's hats and profit by her teaching missed both; and the old women had no one to recount their aches and pains to. Some excitement was, however, derived from the fact that Ashenfold, a large farm-house in the place, had been taken by a Colonel Dysart, in search of a country residence, who brought there a large family of girls and boys—active, helpful, and good-humoured. So the pathway

through the fields was trodden by other girlish feet on their way to school; other hands hung up the Christmas wreaths in Redhurst Church; and Mysie's duties were not altogether left undone. The new folks were grumbled at and sighed over; but they had stirred the dull waters, and on their side, of course, were ready to welcome eagerly the return of the family to the great house—none the less eagerly on account of their mournful story. There would be an acquaintance, for Mr. Spencer Crichton had met Colonel Dysart in Oxley, and had left a card upon him. All business matters remaining in Hugh's hands he had been obliged sometimes to go to Redhurst, and he hardly felt one place to be more dreary than another. Indeed, he was so tired of his self-imposed solitude that he felt glad to think that his mother was coming back again. Perhaps, things would be better, somehow. Still, he could not make up his

mind to be there to receive them, but made some excuse of business for the first night, and then rode home the next day, after the banking hours were over, through the cold, frosty evening, as he had done all his life till the last few months, in secure expectation of finding warmth and light, girlish voices, and little bits of news, small matters to be decided, life and comfort; in one word—home. Ah, could that busy, troublesome, foolish home come back how sweet it would have been! What would he find now? His heart beat fast as he rode up to the door, which was quickly opened, and Hugh felt an odd sort of relief at sight of the bright hall fire-burning; and in another moment he was in the drawing-room, and held his mother in his arms, in, perhaps, the fondest embrace he had ever given to her since he was a little school-boy.

‘Oh, mother, I’m glad you’re come home!’ he said. Frederica came up promptly to

kiss him, and he felt that it was all very comfortable and pleasant, and much more cheerful than he had expected. He had retained the impression of the sorrowful faces and heavy mourning of their last parting. Now there was white about his mother's dress, and Freddie's hair was tied with violet ribbons. He could have dispensed with the presence of the two Miss Brabazons, whose acquaintance had been made at Bournemouth; but, perhaps, as Mrs. Crichton had thought, they helped to fill up blank spaces. Hugh was not a very observant person, but as he glanced round the room he saw that it had a different aspect; the coverings were of another colour, the tables and sofas had been moved, the lamp stood in a new part of the room; there seemed to be no well-known corner or combination left.

‘The place looks different,’ said Hugh, who was not easily affected by externals.

‘Ah, yes,’ said his mother, ‘it was best to make a few changes.’

Hugh shivered, and seemed to see the old scene through the new.

‘You don’t look very well, my dear,’ said Mrs. Crichton. ‘Have you been working too hard?’

‘Oh, no, mother, thank you; I’m well enough. I’ll go now and dress for dinner.’

The changes in the drawing-room had caused Hugh to look out for old associations; but his mother followed him upstairs.

‘You see, Hugh,’ she said, ‘for all the young ones’ sakes it was necessary to get over old impressions. You know this old door was shut up’—suddenly opening it—‘and, by closing the other, and changing the furniture, there is nothing to recall our darling’s room.’

Hugh shrank back. He saw vaguely that it all looked very different; but he could not cross the threshold.

‘Yes, mother, I daresay you’re right,’ he said, hurriedly ; ‘it may make a difference.’

‘And, Hugh, we must not let the house be mournful. When Arthur comes back it will be much better for him to find us cheerful.’

Hugh made no reply. He could not contemplate the thought of Arthur’s return. How had any of them come back, he thought, as he dressed hastily and went downstairs. At dinner his mother asked him if he had seen anything of the new comers to Ashenfold.

‘Yes, I have seen Colonel Dysart. He is a gentleman. There are a great many of them.’

‘I must go and call. Didn’t you tell me, Freddie, that some of them were going to Miss Venning’s?’

‘So Flossy said in her letter,’ returned Freddie.

‘They have been kind and helpful, I

hear. It is a great thing to have that house occupied.'

'We did very well with the old Horehams,' said Hugh, 'though Colonel Dysart is likely to be a good neighbour. Have you been to the Rectory?'

'Oh, yes, we went over at once. I think the dear old folks want us back again. You should have looked in on them now and then on a Sunday, Hugh.'

'It is you they want, not me,' he said. 'I went to Oxley parish church generally. You have not seen the town yet, I suppose, Miss Brabazon?' he added, to change the conversation.

Before the evening was over, Hugh was doubtful whether the cheerfulness around him was not dearly bought by the effort to join in it. There was no want of affectionate feeling in Mrs. Crichton; she missed Mysie every hour, and acknowledged their loss to the full; but she was determined that

it should be regarded as nothing more than a loss, and that, as she phrased it, ‘no morbid feelings should be allowed to exist;’ and she would not acknowledge that Hugh had any special occasion for sensitiveness. Being, with all her good-nature and easiness of discipline, a person of strong will she was determined to create external cheerfulness. Frederica, who had now, of course, become a more important element in the household, was reserved by nature, and, like many young girls, afraid of the force of her own emotions. She could not bear to speak or hear of Mysie, so she turned vehemently to other things; while, the more her high spirits regained their sway, the less she liked any infringement on them.

Hugh was away at the Bank on the day that Flossy came to see them; but she, too, nervous, and inwardly agitated, was glad to talk of external things—about the new people, and their girls coming to school, and

the dear little signorina of whom she was growing so fond, and whose wonderful sweet face was like a poem or a picture.

‘You must bring her to see us, Flossy, when Freddie asks some of her schoolfellows,’ said Mrs. Crichton.

So, little pleasant plans were made, and Redhurst came back into Flossy’s life. Yet, as she walked home through the cold afternoon, the tears rolled down her cheeks. It seemed cruel for the home to be regaining its cheerfulness while Arthur was away, solitary and unhappy. Yet she, herself, how full her life was; how fast the world went on!

‘And we forget because *we must*
And not because *we will*,’

thought Flossy, and in this mood Violante’s tears had surely met with warm sympathy.

Colonel and Mrs. Dysart were called upon, and the family proved to be what is called in country neighbourhoods an ‘acqui-

sition.' They had done up their house. Colonel Dysart hunted and was anxious to get some shooting. There were four sons and five daughters, all between nine and twenty-eight, ready to be sociable. Two of the girls went to school with Freddie; one of the elder ones was useful in the village; some among them rode, sang, and drew—it was worth while being attentive to them; and a promising acquaintance began to spring up. Even old Mrs. Harcourt found visits from the children enlivening to her, and liked to give them winter apples and Christmas roses. It was a good thing, too, to have someone to take an interest in the choir, and the curate, whom Mr. Harcourt's age had recently rendered necessary, found work for the young ladies; while they spoke together with a certain tender curiosity of her whose sweet life and sad fate was already becoming a tradition, to give to the scenery of the tragedy a certain mournful interest, and to

make the touching of Mysie's doings and the taking-up of her duties something of a rare privilege. So, new lives and new possibilities were springing up, slowly and naturally, as the snowdrops began to peep on Mysie's grave.

Hugh did not see much of the new comers; he was away all day, and did not always come out from Oxley in the evening; and he paid so little attention to the talk going on around him that he neither discovered the names and ages of the Dysarts, nor heard anything of the charms of Freddie's new Italian teacher, whose youth and gentleness excited her surprise and delight. But one sunny morning, as he rode into Oxley, a little incident occurred to him. He was passing Oxley Manor, riding slowly under its ivied wall and thinking of nothing less than of its inhabitants, when, from one of the upper windows that looked out close on the road, something fell on his horse's

neck, and then down into the dust at his feet. Hugh looked down—it was a little bunch of violets; then glanced carelessly up at the windows with a laugh. ‘Those girls must be very hard up! What would Flossy say?’ he thought. But no one peeped out to see what had become of her violets, and he rode on, amused as he recalled various boyish pranks of Jem’s and Arthur’s, and left the violets lying in the dust.

When he came back that afternoon his mother called him into the drawing-room. ‘Hugh,’ she said, eagerly, ‘here is a letter from Arthur, which greatly concerns you.’

With the curious sense of reluctance with which he always received anything connected with his cousin, Hugh took the letter, and read—

‘Rome, Jan. 28, 18—,

‘MY DEAR AUNT LILY,—I am glad to hear you are at home again; I did not like to

think of the place being empty. This is a wonderful city, and it is impossible even to mention all the objects of interest it contains. I wish Jem was near to enjoy them. If I tried to describe them it would be like copying a guide-book, and I would rather tell you something of what I have seen when we meet; and I hope that will be soon, for, my dear aunt, I think I have led this wandering life long enough. I have been thinking over things of late, and I wish, if you and Hugh consent, to come home again, and take my place in the Bank, as was originally proposed, and try and do as well as I can. I am very tired of travelling; and, as for choosing any other profession, I don't feel that I can turn my mind to anything fresh, and something I must settle upon. Give my love to Hugh, and tell him I hope I shall be able to make myself useful to him. I shall be very glad to see you all again; and, though life is for ever changed to me, all that is left

to me is at Redhurst with you and my sister and my brother—my brothers, I should say, for so Hugh and Jem have been and must be. I hope and pray not to be idle or useless for *her* sake.

‘Ever your loving nephew,
‘ARTHUR SPENCER.’

Hugh read the letter through, and it touched him to the heart—the exceeding sadness that the writer could hardly disguise, the unwonted profession of affection for himself, and yet the coupling of his name with Jem’s, as if to hide that there was any reason for such profession. He saw how conscientiously Arthur was endeavouring to act, and yet the proposal was terrible to him.

‘Well, Hugh,’ said his mother, after a long pause, ‘it is the best thing for the poor boy, isn’t it?’

‘Of course, mother,’ said Hugh, slowly. ‘Arthur must do exactly as he pleases, have everything as he wishes it ; but—but—I think he is mistaken.’

‘Mistaken, how?’

‘I think he is trying to do what he will not be equal to. How can he *bear* this place?’ said Hugh, in a passionate undertone. ‘Every day would be an agony to him. It is—it would be to me!’

‘Of course,’ said Mrs. Crichton, ‘there will be much that is painful at first ; but he will get over it, and he cannot be banished for ever. Depend upon it, Hugh, the truest kindness will be to let everything be as much a matter of course as possible. The world could not go on if everyone shrank from the scenes of their misfortunes. Arthur is perfectly right, and I am sure he will be much happier in having something to do ; and you’ll find his natural cheerfulness will help him

through. We must make it as pleasant and easy as possible.'

Hugh rose and gave the letter back to his mother. 'Tell him it shall be as he wishes,' he said; 'but tell him also that if ever he changes his mind I will not hold him to his word;' and, without waiting for an answer, he went hurriedly away to his own room. How should he bear Arthur's presence, how endure the sight of his sorrow? Could he ride into Oxley with him every day, when every weary look and dispirited tone would be like the thrust of a dagger. The more generous and unselfish Arthur was, the bitterer seemed the reproach. The idea of constant association was so terrible to him that, just in judgment as Hugh was, it almost seemed to him as if a choice so unlike his own must be dictated by feelings less intense and a memory less keen. 'How can he bear the sight of me?' he thought. 'I

would have gone to the ends of the earth sooner than come back. If he has any feeling he will not be able to endure it! However, it doesn't matter what it is to me!'

Hugh honoured the sacrifice, and yet half despised his cousin for the power of making it. He would have considered it his duty to yield up his most cherished feelings for Arthur, and yet he regarded him with a shrinking that, in so passionate a nature, was almost hate. Truly, his mother was right in thinking that such morbid feelings did not deserve encouragement. And then there was the constant haunting belief that he was enduring in silence a loss and a want similar to that for which everyone was pitying his cousin. And when Hugh's thoughts took that turn he sometimes felt as if he were making a sort of secret atonement. But all this was in the depths of Hugh's soul; his

sensible outer judgment knew the probable risk of reaction for so young a man as Arthur, and felt that home and work were his best safeguards. And Hugh remembered that he had still his rooms at the Bank House, where a press of business might always detain him if Redhurst became quite unendurable. When Frederica went to school the next morning she told Flossy, as she came into her Italian class and was waiting for some of her companions, that Arthur was coming home.

‘Signor Arthur?’ said Violante, who was standing by.

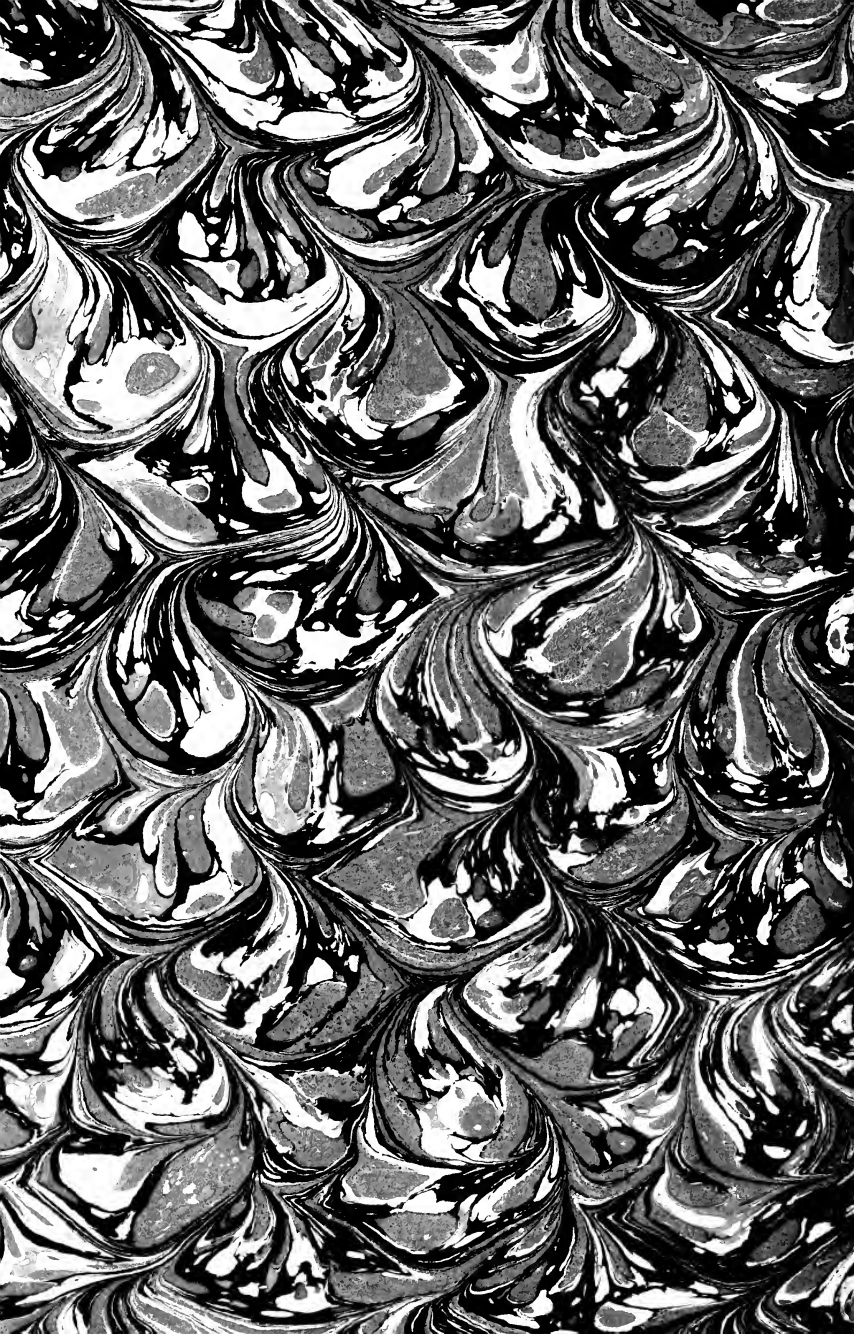
‘Yes,’ answered Frederica, who, of course, had been informed of the meeting at Caletto; ‘he will be surprised to see you, signorina. He is coming back and going to begin at the Bank, and go on as usual.’

‘I hope—it will do,’ said Flossy, rather tremulously. Violante glanced at her and

began to read herself, as the girls came in and took their places; and Miss Florence let her take the lead, and neither asked nor answered a question for full five minutes.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

LONDON: PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO., NEW-STREET SQUARE
AND PARLIAMENT STREET





UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA



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